

Emergence of New Woman in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

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Among modern Indian English women writers, Shobha De is one of the most eminent and popular novelists of the present time. She was born in Maharashtra in 1948. She had graduated with a degree in Psychology from St. Xavier's College, Bombay. She began a career in Journalism in 1970 in the course of which she founded and edited three popular magazines *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*. She is unique in her writings and makes an intimate understanding of the psyche of woman and her problems. Her treatment of the contemporary urban woman's position and the challenges she faces is not without significance. She writes with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist's flag she feels very strongly about the woman's situation. Largely speaking, Indian fiction depicts three kinds of women: First, rural class women, portrayed by writers like Kamala Markandaya and R.K. Narayan; secondly, the middle class women, especially the educated and employed, characterised by writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande and thirdly, the neo-rich aristocratic women depicted by writers like Namita Gokhale and Shobha De.

In the present era of globalisation, modern woman has been uprooted from her native place and has been pitted against people and culture alien to herself. This uprooted woman may be living whether in a crowded city or work among people, but she lives an isolated life. There is lack of emotional tie between her and the people among whom she lives, consequently there is a strong feelings of desertion in her. Her novels, says R.S. Pathak in *Feminist Concern in Shobha De's Works*, seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. Like Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal, she concentrates on women's problems and gives a new approach to them. She gives vivid picture of the society and culture of the high society of contemporary India. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. For this, she explores the world of urban women in India. Isolation and crisis for self identification are seen in the novel of Shobha De's first novel *Socialite Evenings*.

Shobha De is a modern woman novelist who recognises the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this

pattern upside down through her works. A feminist recognises the partiality in the phallogocentric principles, ideologies and social structure of life and raises a voice of protest against it. For the women of the third world, feminism means a rebellion wherein she struggles to achieve a social, racial, economic and spiritual equality with man. The cause of such a protest Sarah Grimke traces in a perennial sin the male has ever committed against the female:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish qualification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind. (Sarah Grimke 10)

It has been seen in India that the struggle for women's equality with man that voiced all the more prominently in the last couple of decades. Especially the second generation of Indian women novelists like Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, and Anita Desai have challenged the male culture that prevails in our country. But the early soft voices of protest gradually changed into an explicit annoyance and finally took the shape of an open rebellion. Each novel of Shobha De raises a protest against the male dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom to act according to their will and continue to cherish their own dreams in futility. Women are treated as mere 'man's shadow – self'. They are considered the otherness of man and not one with men or individuals. However, the role of women in society has been changing with each decade of a century, always with good deal of social conflict and ideological struggle. These have left a great influence and social codes of the prevalent society are well embodied by Shobha De in her characters. She has voices against the male culture and strongly detects the marginalization of women. She doesn't believe in describing her women characters as love-slaves or mere helpmates at home. She always reveals her protest against the good old image of woman as 'an auxiliary'. Shobha De strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman who cries for liberty and equality which still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. Her women may or may not be flappers yet they are much more physical and athletic than their mothers have been. In 1927 an article entitled "Feminist- New Style" in Harper's 'Magazine' declared the newly evolved

modern composite figure of a boyish girl who can happily combine pleasure, career and marriage :

To the advance young man of the time,
this new woman seems the perfect
companion... fearless, bright and eager
to participate in works, in play, in marital
sex. (Schneider 148)

Socialite Evenings gives us the picture of the marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Shobha De presents the picture of women not only as protagonists but also as motivating factors in society, initiating and regulating their own lives as well as the lives of others in the voluptuously fascinating world of Bombayites, its enticing glitter and glamour enamouring many a Karunas of its ensnaring and captivating gossamer. Karuna, the heroine, a prominent Bombay socialite, is born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra and does not devote much time to “know” her daughter. Karuna’s life starts only when she migrates to Bombay because of her father’s official transfer. She meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Her whole world changes and Karuna starts dreaming of a career in films and holidays abroad. When she enters college and gets married to Bunty, a rich businessman, the family accepts him because of his social status. But he is not the right “husband material”, discovers Karuna.

He was just an average Indian husband
– unexciting, uninspiring, untutored...
He wasn’t looking for any stimulation,
either intellectually or emotionally.
(*Socialite Evenings* 130)

She gets bored with her husband who does not share her interests, tries to drown her blues in reading books and crossword puzzles. Anjali suggests that she could try an affair as an antidote. Krish comes her way. Ritu, her friend who had practised flirting as an art educates her about the rules laid down for adultery :

no calls on Sunday, no calls at home,
letters to be destroyed immediately after
reading...no presents. (171)

She meets Si, another friend who ridicules her for not having a car. She tells Karuna :

you mean after so many years of slavery
you haven't earned a car yet. (130)

In her works like *Socialite Evenings*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, Shobha De attempts to portray the above-discussed feminine characteristics. Her female protagonists are just remarkable when measured against men. Men-women relation is almost hollow, ineffectual and compromising. Men-women's complementary image has been completely shattered. She has tried to highlight the discord in marital relationship. It has been in her novels that the world is out of sexual order. It is usually panic and destructive for them to be together. Of course, the female characters need the companionship of a man in order to satisfy their natural urge. Shobha De's protagonists are daring and establish extra marital affairs to get rid of their marital ennui. These women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to gain social and financial benefits; marriage for them is merely an insurance against social aloofness. Throughout the novel *Socialite Evenings*, the protagonist Karuna rejects the traditional path of etiquette and manners. Her marriage is a failure since it is without love, joy, and mutual faith. Her husband is an average Indian husband as he is "unexciting, uninspiring, untutored. He was not made for introspection". (65) We find Karuna saying, "marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to". (68) Though she becomes a well trained wife there seems to be no meaningful communication between the couple. Karuna voices her protest about her futile and meaningless marital relationship :

I think our marriage was over the day
our honeymoon started. We have got
nothing. I don't love you—never have.
As for you – I really don't know to this
day why you chose to marry me. I don't
think you even know whom you married.
(185)

All the women in the novel are attractive, self-assured, conscious of their plus points and clever enough to hide their drawbacks. They are happy with wealth, happy with the pleasures which they could buy with money and the new-found freedom. Anjali leaves behind her teenaged daughter under her husband's care, allows her to take any man to bed, as long as she did it discreetly. The pretty young wife was only another status symbol for him. Karuna did not want to have a baby, and seeks abortion when she gets pregnant, and later learns that she cannot conceive

any more. In the process of establishing her identity, she divorces her husband and takes up Journalism as her career.

In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the male who shouts, hurts, abuses, bullies, reproaches, criticises and it is the woman who listens, tolerates and remains passive. But Shobha De's women are different. Like Karuna they are not mere binding vine, "Yes-persons" to bow down in meek subordination. They are like the new women who fight back, resist and shout back. Karuna's imaginary craving for the fulfilment of her physical desire finds reflection in her fantasies. Anjali's fancy place in Malabar Hill, the regular haunt of Karuna is symbolically the projection of her fancy, her dream which in reality is but a myth. A woman lives in a world of fancies, insignificant but profoundly imaginative. Talking of women, Virginia Woolf says:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant, some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband. (Woolf 45-46)

Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* plays different roles at different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer and a paramour. Marriage subjugates and enslaves women. It leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose". (Beauvoir 500) Unlike other married women who have practically no choice left to them save what their husband wills and desires, Karuna has independent thoughts. She is free to choose her ways and means. She unveils and unfurls herself to activate the creative urge stifled within herself. Like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De does not overdo women's suffering. She transforms it into a creative principle of art and beauty.

There is a complete emotional void; only silence, compromise and adjustment seem to prevail between the two. This marital boredom leads her to establish an affair with Girish, which she considers beyond sin. She is happy to express without any hesitation her sexual urge for a man other than her husband, even to her. She makes an ingenious declaration about her inner thirst in the following words:

I love this friend of yours, and I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. May be he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me. In which case it will really be; A Death in Venice. (*Socialite Evenings* 186)

Here it appears that Karuna has just a formal relationship with her husband. Intimacy between two seems missing altogether. Similarly, in the novel *Sisters*, Alisha first goes to Naveen for sexual gratification and later it continues to sway her to Dr. Kurien. The actress Asha Rani in *Starry Nights* finally decides to quit films and live with Akshay. Her Amma tries to dissuade her from doing so. Asha Rani boldly pronounces:

Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up of being your money machine. I have done enough for everybody – you. Sudha and others – now, I want to live for myself and enjoy life. (*Starry Nights* 308)

Shobha De's women are far more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison to their male counterparts. They are not submissive. They are not guilty about their affairs and attitudes. Her female protagonist challenges the traditional set up of the society. In the course of breaking social traditions and conventions, they establish sexual relation with other men without any feeling of guilt. Karuna is able to recognise how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate and are denied to live as autonomous beings. Though her husband is not cruel but certainly he tries to impose his superiority which we can sense from Karuna's statement:

He brainwashes me constantly. I'm awful but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house has become a battleground. (*Socialite Evenings* 69)

This certifies that men in Shobha De's works are traditional and stereotyped. They are not the ideal husbands as they are incomplete and inadequate. So Shobha De's women are maturer than their mates. Men seem very passive in response to women; they are either indifferent or insensitive, unwilling or unable to take action or to accept responsibility for the way things turn out.

Women in De's novel symbolise the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality, that characterises modern age. With crumbling of moral and ethical values there is an inner conflict which drives the modern Indian women to seek shelter in different identities for momentary solace. One of the most notable features of these women is that they lack an identity. But we should not lay whole blame on women only because in De's novels we do have the type of men who use and abuse women and then discard them. In *Socialite Evenings* we do encounter a liberal husband who allows his Indian wife to go abroad and get herself screwed once for all presenting to us the last gesture of goodwill. From the individual, let us come to the family. It is the family which is the centre of deviation. Anjali throws off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rises to the social status of the upper classes. She enacts a marriage of choice with Abe, "an experienced rake with a wild reputation (12)" and rejoices in orgiastic acrobatics.

To sum up, we can say that Shobha De writes from a definite feminine perspective. Her female characters are endowed with a vision which penetrates human psyche. They easily outplay their male counterparts with a better control and placidity in their attitude, desire and expression. Mostly the males are subdued and threatened by the self-assured and self-reliant females. Her women revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds, be it business or sexual spheres. In a sense, she is the forerunner of the emerging Indian women with her liberated womanhood.

Thus De's novel shows the struggle of woman against the predatory male-dominated society. But her vamp ideology of feminism provides no redemption for the deviant and fallen woman who in their frantic struggle to escape male-dominated society and attain individuality, meet with failure and are victimized in one way or the other. Shobha De depicts Karuna, a young Indian from a middle-class family as a capable woman able to circumvent her lot in life and launch into the kind of life-style of modeling and independent journalistic essays. It is still not acceptable in conventional Indian society. De's women like Anjali and Karuna project their passions into others as a female overplay in order to deconstruct the male ego.

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