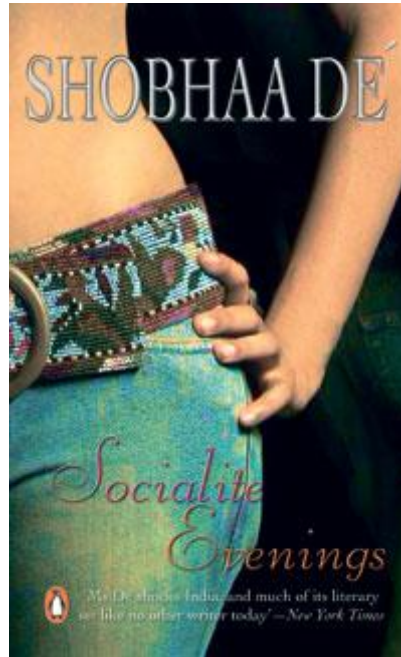


## A Thematic Study of Shobhaa De's Novels -- *Socialite Evenings and Second Thoughts*

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### Lawrentian Shobhaa De

Shobhaa De began a career in journalism in 1970 in the course of which she founded and edited three popular magazines *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity* and was consulting Editor to *Sunday* and *Megacity*. She earned both name and fame while working as a freelance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines. Shobhaa De, a modern novelist, famous for portraying the sexual mania of the commercial world in a very frank and straight forward way, shot into literary limelight by writing her first novel, *Socialite Evenings* which is lawrentian in expression. She believes that a man's personality can be judged in a true perspective only when one goes into the interior more than his exterior behaviour. Sex, 'the root of all our energy' plays a very vital role in the fictional world of Shobhaa De. Most of her novels analyse the various aspects of sex, a great urge of human beings.

### A Prolific Creative Writer



**Shobhaa De**

Courtesy: <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/netas-vs-shobhaa-de-no-regrets-for-threats-sexist-remarks-399875>

Shobhaa De is an author of twelve books. Her works generally start with the letter 'S'. Her first novel was the best-selling *Socialite Evenings* (1989). In 1990 she published *Starry Nights*. Her other works are *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), *Second Thoughts* (1996), *Uncertain Liaisons* (Co-edited with Khushwant Singh, 1993), *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings* (1994), *Surviving Men* (1997), *Selective Memory* (1998), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Speedpost* (2000), *Spouse* (2004), *Super India* (2008), while *Swabhimaan Kity Party* and *Sukanya* are her TV serials telecast by DD1 and DD2 in 1997, 2001 and 2003-2004 respectively. She is also renowned as a freelance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines.

### **Tactful Treatment of Themes and Characters**

Shobhaa De as a writer is gifted with an extra-ordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. The way she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really insightful. Conservatives in India may criticise her for her open discussion on sexual matters. But her fiction has got tremendous response from all over the world including several European countries.

### ***Second Thoughts***



From *Socialite Evenings* to *Second Thoughts*, Shobhaa De evolved as a sensitive writer. Because of the type of stories Shobhaa presents in her novels one may assume that there is little insight into human nature and very little effort made to probe into human nature and feeling. However, Shobhaa De's stories are real stories, still happening in real life. Human relations based on gender distinctions, masculine domination, women's predicament relating to tradition and modernity are all important issues. And Shobhaa De, through ordinary stories, brings out the reality of our world around us.

### **From High Society to Middle Class**

A departure from her earlier novels, *Second Thoughts* is a bitter sweet love story of the nineties. The high society, which was the familiar background of the novels, has been replaced by middle class society.

### **Maya and Ranjan**

Maya, pretty and young, is eager to escape her dull and middleclass home in Calcutta and plunges into the whirl of Bombay, where she moves after her marriage. Ranjan,

handsome, hard-driving and ambitious, has the glamour of an American University degree and a wealthy family background. But soon she finds herself trapped and stifled by the confines of an arranged marriage to a man who she discovers is rigidly conservative and indifferent to her desires and does not respect her feelings. She begins to experience utter loneliness. She then strikes a friendship and love affair with Nikhil, her charming college going neighbour.

### **Depiction of the Psyche of a Married Indian Woman**

In *Second Thoughts*, with regard to projecting the psyche of a married Indian woman who is caught and crushed between the nature-culture wheels on the one hand, and pulled apart on one side by the centrifugal acts of Ranjan, her husband and on another side by the centrifugal acts of Nikhil, her lover. Some of us may feel that if we take a very critical view of ill-treatment meted out to women, Maya's affair with Nikhil may be justified. When Ranjan is of no use for her, she has no other way out. Even the title *Second Thoughts* is also quite suggestive as far as the protagonist's affair with Nikhil is concerned. The novel also reveals Shobhaa De's exploration of new horizons.

### **Karuna in *Socialite Evenings***

*Socialite Evenings*, the first novel of Shobhaa De, is about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna, from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna is born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra and does not remember much of her childhood except the strict vigilance of her father. Her mother, who was preoccupied with domestic chores, does not devote much time to "know" her daughter. Karuna's life starts only when they migrate to Bombay because of her father's official transfer. She meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy.

### **Karuna and Her Husband**

Karuna's 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 business man, 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". She gets bored with

her husband who does not share her interests, tries to down her blues in reading books and crossword puzzles.

### **Beginning Affairs and Changes in Life**

Anjali suggests that she should 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 Sundays, no calls at home, letters to be destroyed immediately after reading... no presents”(171).

All the women in the novel are attractive, self-assured, and conscious of their plus points and are clever enough to hide their drawbacks. They are happy with health, happy with the pleasures which they could buy with money and the new-found freedom. Anjali leaves behind her teenage 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. Ranbir, her colleague, is interesting enough to have fun but not to live with. Finally she ends up a loner who finds her evenings lonely in spite of her active participation in “Socialite Evenings”.

### **Against Patriarchal Hegemony**

Shobhaa De constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice against the male-dominance by presenting the concept of the ‘New Woman’ who is new literary female model, assertive and self-willed, searching to discover her true self. The new woman is in fact an urban middle –class woman who still suffers but not in silence as she need to be.

The modern Indian woman who is at the centre of fiction of Shobhaa De, is no longer a model of Vedic or Pre-Vedic woman, nor is she modelled on the past-Aryan woman who is portrayed passive in nature and accepts the dominance of men in society. Her women characters in most of her novels like *‘Socialite Evenings’*, *‘Starry Nights’*, *‘Sisters’*, *‘Strange Obsession’*, *‘Sultry Days’*, *‘Second Thoughts’*, *‘Snapshots’*, *‘Shooting from the Hip’*, *‘Small Betrayals’*, *‘Surviving Men’* etc., represent the picture of a new woman.

### **Protest against the Ideal**

A close study of Shobhaa De's works reveals her protest against the good and ideal image of woman. She writes about female gender and gives graphic depiction of their pursuits and attitudes. These create a cry against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied freedom and forced to act at the whims and wishes of their husbands. In fact, in doing so, Shobhaa De provides enough ground for criticism from the orthodox Indian society! But she keeps on writing without being disturbed.

### **A Feeling of Incompleteness and Stereotypes**

The feeling that *Socialite Evenings* first induces in us is of incompleteness. De's novel is populated with more stereotypes than characters. The stereotypes are mainly of women. The heroines all subscribe to a role-model tailored by the patriarchal set-up. The character Anjali, described very early as "memsaaby", (SE 9) is a good example. De portrays her as an apparently independent lady: rich, confident and beautiful. De however etches a subtle mark onto this near-flawless picture. The readers are told that "like most women in her circle, she (Anjali) had started dabbling in fashion designing and advertising" (SE 10).

### **Sexual Dependence - "I-cannot-live-without-a-male"**

A more effective mode of male control is reflected in De's portrayal of the woman's sexual dependence. The heroines start off as sexual libertines. And yet, they all fall prey to the "I-cannot-live-without-a-male" syndrome. Anjali gives up her career, independence and a husband for the homosexual Kumar. The heroines are attracted to the masculinity of the male in *Socialite Evenings*.

Karuna is herself attracted to a different kind of masculinity – to the intellectual snobbery of Girish (film director). Thus, the heroines of De ascribe to their men a definite higher status sexually and intellectually. The men therefore automatically become protector-provider for the women, a truly romantic "knight-in-shining-armor" feature. The dependency and vulnerability of the heroine is tied to the theme of chastity/purity. In *Socialite Evenings*, women fail in their relationships until they turn monogamous (monogamy for women being a male-prescribed requirement). Extra-marital affairs do not fetch happiness for the women.

### **Dependence on Pre-determined Ideals**

Heroines in De's novels institute their identities in line with male pre-determined ideals. Karuna is initiated into the life of a model by her mentor Anjali (SE 10-12). Karuna had always "yearned to be a part of the smart and beautiful set" (SE 10). Modelling helps her create an identity for herself. The glamour is retained up to a point and then quickly tarnished. The reader can understand that Anjali's own tragedy with her husband Abe. Karuna wants Anjali "to remain her queenly self" (SE 29).

In *Socialite Evenings*, the woman is constantly reminded of her identity until she assimilates this identity as herself. In De's novel, this assimilatory process is helped by the roles of media and the flow of information. Unlike in early romances, the heroine's virtues are not narrated in epideictic speeches to people but embodied as images.

### ***Second Thoughts***

In *Second Thoughts*, the storyline of the novel is not very intricate and arresting. It revolves round the charming and young Maya. In order to escape her dull, middle-class home in Calcutta, she marries Ranjan and plunges into the "whirl of Bombay". Maya, though determined to be an ideal wife, discovers herself stifled by the confines of an arranged marriage. Although the man (Ranjan) she marries has all the glamour of an "American degree" and a "wealthy family" background, yet he is completely indifferent to her desires. Experiencing utter loneliness of a stranger in Bombay, she begins an explosive affair with Nikhil, a young college-going neighbour. The novel ends on a note of bitterness.

Maya, Ranjan and Nikhil are the main characters around whom the story in the novel revolves. The other insignificant characters – Maya's mother, father, uncle, Nikhil's mother and Ranjan's mother – just help in the development of the storyline. The noteworthy feature of De's characters is that her male characters are weaker protagonist in the novel. Maya is charming with "gleaming jet black hair" and "large dark eyes". She, "a trained textile designer," is depicted in the novel as a non-conformist.

Shobhaa De's realism is responsible for the various situations and themes described in her novels of a particular class of people and a particular aspect of the world of glamour



which are deceptive to the core and eventually detrimental to innocent and unsuspecting young girls and ambitious women. Indisputably her images and metaphors may appear to be lewd, licentious and crossing the limits of decency. However, the novelist has described truthfully not only in the matter of theme but also through the linguistic expressions the man-woman intimate interaction in life as she witnessed.

The ending of the novel is abrupt, no doubt, but Shobhaa De has successfully depicted the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women (and also men) in properly negotiating the conflicting situations emerging from a clash between conservatism and liberalism. The gender issue of male chauvinistic dominance and non-acceptance of a liberated woman by the Indian society, the gnawing questions of sexual, familial, and individual dilemma have been dexterously highlighted by Shobhaa De in *Second Thoughts*.

However, the most significant aspect of this novel is that the author has once again raised the burning issue of women's freedom in contemporary India where the protagonist finds herself in a complex human situation aggravated by social, historical and cultural changes.

### **Surrendering the Will and Identity Crisis**

Though Maya's efforts at new ways of self-determination led by the logic of cultural transition fail, yet she survives the spiritual claustrophobia by surrendering her "will" to the prevalent social mores. Social oppression leads to an identity crisis in women and women's fiction gives this aspect priority. Shobhaa De's women in her novels are no exception to this process. In fact, her novels ought to be understood and interpreted both from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view for they portray women torn between tradition and modernity. The novels of Shobhaa De uses bold sexual imagery. There lies sufficient food for thought under the surface which provides an in-depth study of the female psyche narrated so dexterously.

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169

A Thematic Study of Shobhaa De's Novels -- Socialite Evenings and Second Thoughts



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