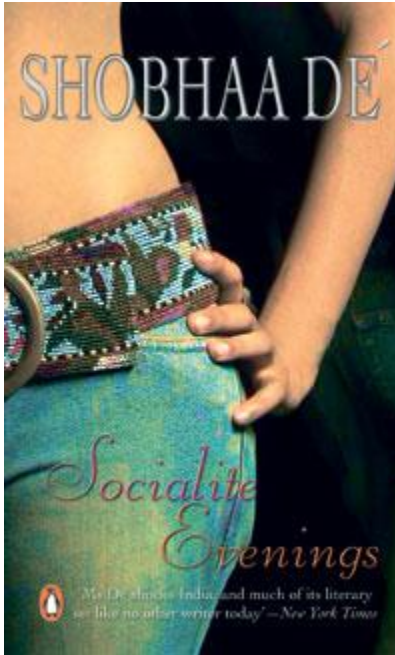


Protest Against Male in Shobha De's *Socialite Evening*
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Shobha De

Shobha De is one of the modern Indian women novelists. Her cares and worries in the fictions probe into the reverberations of the inner self of the modern woman. She explores against the contemporary urban woman as her novels are the slice of urban life. The novel *Socialite Evenings* deals with the current disputes correlated to subjugated and marginalized women. She presents an intimate side of urban woman's life in her novels and at the same time realistically it reveals her plight in the present-day society. It is a fact that the woman is a victim everywhere of the prevalent social norms. She gets trapped within the set of moral codes and social norms of the society and consequently leads an unhappy life. Urban woman's life is also no exception to it.

Born To Be As Free As Man

As a matter of fact, a woman is born to be as free as man, but she is victimized and subdued by the male community everywhere in patriarchal culture. She has been the subordinate sex, 'the second sex' and has to conform to male standards. The term 'man' usually reveals the entire human race, while 'woman' is silent and not mentioned. In the male-dominated society woman is still a second person and does not enjoy equal status with men. Even an educated

woman cannot pursue her career without performing domestic duties. She has to pay attention to her career as well as home at the stake of her potentialities. This is one of the reasons why the conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by the women novelists.

Portrayals of a Variety of Women

Shobha De's concern with the different aspects of woman's life makes her portray a variety of women and it is this portrayal of women that brings out the different ways the women are subjected to male hegemony. In most of her novels, she has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. It is the fact that the majority of women in the last century were content with their lot of subordination in the home and society. But recently numerous women have expressed their discontent with their inferior status and strived for equality with men. They protested and agitated for equal fundamental rights. Being a woman, Shobha De through some of her women characters presents a very vivid picture of the inequality between men and women prevalent in the society even today. She draws our attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commoditization. It is very apparent that women in this male dominated society are treated with double standard. Talking of women Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* 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. (45-46)

Subjugation and Marginalization

At one end, women are opting for careers in space research and undertaking many important scientific and technical projects and at the other end they are the targets of sexual exploitation. Though this seems contradictory there is nothing strange because in reality subjugation and marginalization are the vital factors in the lives of women. The calculation is simple: if patriarchal society is to survive, woman as a person cannot. Indian society has been and is even today a male-dominated society. In the Indian social structure woman has been practically granted a subordinate position. Naturally she does not have independent status and is supposed to perform all the household duties but has limited rights. Her main job is to manage the house and rear the children. She is on duty for eighteen hours a day with no leisure of any sort. Though she performs honestly all household duties, she does not get financial freedom. Moreover, it is woman who is victimized and discriminated at each and every stage and is never regarded as an autonomous being. She has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position in all spheres of life. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says:

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees.... She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other. (16)

Integral Part of Human Civilization

Women are an integral part of human civilization. No nation or society can progress without active participation of women in its overall development. Woman in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age. In all societies the woman has never been considered as equal to man her status depends largely on the simple biological fact that she is inferior to man and that is why she is usually restricted to the assigned roles. A woman has been the victim of male, is treated like a beast and an object for pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex and his sole property. Many religions in the world have given sanction to the female's subjugation to the male members of the society.

Socialite Evenings

Socialite Evenings is about the journey of a prominent Mumbai socialite Karuna, from a middle-class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna's life can be divided into three phases – life before marriage, married life, and life after the separation from her husband. In all these three phases of her life readers notice the rebellious instinct. In her childhood days she was the only child with a discipline problem both at home and at school. For example, she didn't like going to school by train or a double-decker bus. While other girls dressed in smart terrycloth uniforms, she wore her sash hipster-style. Her sisters preferred to concentrate on their percentages whereas she preferred to discover Bombay and Bombay ites. The following words of Karuna clearly reveal how she protested to follow the traditional path of etiquette and manners and the ways that come in the way of her total development as a woman. She says:

In the house- not jumping at the sound of Father's voice booming out some command. Not putting my stuff away after school. Leaving a dirty thali on the dining table, whistling in the bathroom, backcombing and teasing my hair, refusing to fetch trays of tea for boring visitors, being cheeky with relatives and, mainly, not cowering in the presence of 'elders'. (6-7)

Naturally, as she grew up there developed in her the emotional urge to identify with the outside world, the modern crowd and the fascinating world of affluent girls who had everything. She was not interested in her studies like her sisters and other classmates. She was associated with her college friend Charlie and also acted as a model for ad agency much against her father's will. It has been the desire of Karuna to get rid of her middle-class background and shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle run government official. At this juncture she meets Anjali a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Anjali is an independent lady, rich, confident and beautiful. She has everything the modern woman needed: French perfumes, Impala in silver grey and a fancy place in Malabar Hill. Moreover, she belongs to the world of fashion designing and advertising. This example of Anjali makes Karuna to think that the fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status in her life and would help her to fulfil all her desires. So she freely indulges in the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, the middle-aged prominent socialite. Karuna's very entry in the glamorous world of modeling and friendship with her boyfriend Bunty, is the act of rebellion against the established traditional norms of patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Karuna's psyche develops through protest and defiance. In other words, she appears as 'disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient'.

Karuna

De portrays Karuna as a capable woman, able to circumvent her lot in life and launch into a kind of life style of modeling and independent journalistic essays that is still not acceptable in conventional Indian society. In this patriarchal society, man can only think about his life without woman, but a woman cannot do the same. What a wife can do when she is ignored and neglected for all her feelings? Her's is apathetic condition. Some women mutely tolerate this situation and spend their whole life in suffocated atmosphere. But Shobha De's women are different as they do not meekly accept their subordinate position. In *Socialite Evenings*, for instance, Karuna's marriage is a complete failure. She has only a formal relationship with her husband. Even she never calls her husband by his name but in a derogatory term such as a 'Black Label'. There is no intimacy between them. The relationship between them is totally deprived of mutual understanding, love and affection. Here is an example of how she protests about her meaningless marital relationship:

You really make me sick. I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We have got nothing going. 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 who you married. You don't have a clue what sort of a woman I am. I am tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerisms, the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into your overall scheme of things... so just get off my back. (176-77)

Meets Krish

Karuna's incompatible unhappy married life leads her to boredom. And at this stage that she meets Krish, an old friend of her husband. This association and company of Kris makes her mind to revolt against her insensitive husband. Her emotional and psychological needs started getting satisfied by him. This results in developing an extra-marital relationship with him. Karuna is very similar to Rosie of *The Guide* who also turns to Raju, the guide for emotional fulfillment. Karuna's husband and Marco are most insensitive, inhuman persons who are completely engrossed in their own worlds and unaware of emotional demands of their sensitive wives. Both have unexciting, uninspiring attitude. Being a head of family, they are expected to look after everyone and should take care of everything but contrast to this they are most negligent and least bothered. In the beginning, Karuna tries to adjust and make a compromise to save her marriage. But her open rebellion comes forth when she admits her extra-marital relations just in front of her husband. She tells her husband very frankly :

I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him – in Venice. There is a good chance that 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*. You know by now that I am not the flighty sort. I don't flirt at random like my other friends. I am steady and grounded. It is the Taurean in me that is surfacing these days. Treat this as a short-term mania that will wear itself out – and then we can go back to business as usual. (178)

Indulges in Promiscuous Sex

Henceforth, she indulges in promiscuous sex, and makes her husband either to tolerate or ignore it. She openly accepts her deviant behavior and challenges her husband. She further points

out to her husband that his failure to understand her as a woman is the real cause of her unusual and unacceptable behavior. Even she goes a step further by giving divorce to her husband. She decided to lead a single life because she wanted to assert her individuality. The struggle of Karuna, therefore, does not remain confined only to her but becomes representative struggle of the modern women to be free and self-reliant. After her divorce, her husband meets her to express his regret and ask her to come back and live with him. He is prompted to visit her by the typical patriarchal understanding and expectation regarding women's response in such situations. It is traditionally believed that finally woman ignores the cruelties of her husband as she thinks he has certain privileges over her. But Karuna's response is shocking and unexpected because she firmly asks her husband to go away. It is a powerful jolt to the patriarchal man. She even verbally abuses her husband when he comes with the proposal to remarry her:

'And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don't ever want to see you again. I let you in this time – but never again. I will call the cops if you try and invade my house in future. You are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie – I hope she has got a wax doll of yours. I will send her some extra pins to stick into it. Now take your frigging pipe and OUT !!' (256-57)

Rejects the Idea of Her Second Marriage

Thus, she reacts and rejects the idea of her second marriage. Now she prefers 'friendship' to permanent subjugation and hence also rejects the proposal of Ranbir Roy. There is a contrast between Karuna and her mother in their attitude towards the institution of marriage. Her mother stands for traditional Hindu woman while Karuna is modern in her attitude. The women like Karuna's mother have subordinate status in the society for they accept passively everything that comes to them by fate or tradition. Karuna's traditional mother advises Karuna to marry the right person. A woman cannot live alone; it is not safe. But this view of her mother is full of improbabilities because is it possible for the girl to marry 'the right one' and is it possible to attain 'security' and 'peace' in modern society, particularly in the urban setting of Mumbai? No. Hence, the feminist voice is raised by Karuna when she questions her mother:

'But mother, why does security rest with a man?' I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don't really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I am not answerable to anyone. I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. I like and respect Girish. We share a lot of common interests. But I am not sure I will make a goodwife to him. Or he a good husband to me. Perhaps we are both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any "sacrifices" – not now?' (268).

Karuna refuses to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore that's why she rebels against the patriarchal system. She resents, resists and rejects male dominance. Her statements reflect her desire for the affirmation of herself. She wants to destroy the gender discrimination – the real source of women's oppression and create a new society in which there will be no place for inequality between men and women. But she is a lone rebel who passes from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, and from weakness to strength. It is at this stage she takes decisions on her own, free of all influences, for example, with her hard earned money, she buys a "cheapie round trip-ticket" to go to America. It is in this respect that Karuna differs considerably from Anjali and Ritu, the two other important women characters in the

novel. They, like Karuna, do not challenge the patriarchal system. Though Anjali defies the traditional norms of moral values and rises to the social status of upper classes, she cannot live without husband. First she marries Abe, to get exploited and later get divorce from him. Then she marries Kumar Bhandari. However, this second marriage of Anjali changes the course of her life completely because her husband turns homosexual. In spite of this fact she does not break it. Ritu, a friend of Karuna, also leaves her husband for Gul, the underworld don, which turns her into a whore and a pimp. Thus after having suffered mentally and physically at the hands of her lover, she returns to her husband. But Ritu on the other hand invents a strategy to keep her husband within her control. She tells Karuna about this strategy:

The trick is to make them feel you have done them a favor by marrying them. Once you achieve that, the equation works out. ... Make them feel insecure. Let them think you will walk out on them if they don't toe the line. That is what keeps them in their place. (78)

She further tells Karuna: "men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment" (79). The only thing is one has got to play the game. According to Ritu the women, by using the weapon of sex, flatter men and can easily exercise control over them. This clearly indicates that these women are liberated individuals in search of their self-identity. R. Morgon (1983: 143) observes, "De's women like Anjali and Karuna project their power on others, to deconstruct the male ego. They like to be "eroticized as objects" and to view themselves as "erotic objects", not subjects". The novelist presents these modern women having courage to revolt and refuse being puppets in the hands of men in the name of tradition and society.

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