Illusion Versus Reality in Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*
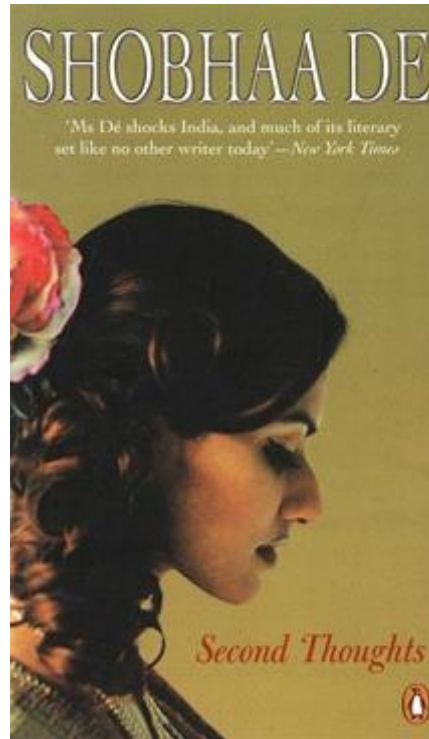
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Abstract

Shobha De, in her novel *Second Thoughts* reflects through her protagonist Maya, the acute marginalization and displacement experienced by the majority of the womenfolk who are forced to suffer silently the rigid social systems which govern the male dominated Indian society. Being a protagonist of De, Maya differs from others by the dual personality that prevails within her. On the one side, the conventional tradition-bound concepts and values highlighting the passivity in women instilled in her by the traditional background as well as the over-dominating attitude of her mother turn her to be a passive introvert. And on the other, an inborn feministic instinctual urge to be unique, to be different from others, to achieve something, to live life in its fullest sense prompts her to revolt against patriarchal superiority. When marriage proves futile, unable to confront reality, Maya is forced to live in a world of illusion. Maya, in her inner consciousness decries tradition and strives to relieve herself from the tradition bound marriage with Ranjan. In her imagination, Maya is able to break away from tradition and take decisions of her own. But, in reality, she is forced to remain bound by the societal concept of marriage. The inexperienced Maya, living in a world of illusion, dreams of Nikhil to be her ideal lover who would surely rescue her from such a monotonous and accursed family life. Maya as a matured woman exhibits the mental strength to give her marital life a second thought where she is bold

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enough to confront the sultriness of not only Mumbai but also her own life. Thus, Maya is able to overcome the influence of illusion in her life and accommodate herself with reality.

Introduction

Shobha De, in her novel *Second Thoughts* reflects through her protagonist Maya, the acute marginalization and displacement experienced by the majority of the womenfolk who are forced to suffer silently the rigid social systems which govern the male dominated Indian society. While almost all the other protagonists of Shobha De are rebellious and revolting in their attitude towards patriarchal hegemony, Maya is one exception. Through her, Shobha De succeeds in presenting a realistic portrayal of female suppression in its extreme level, where Maya is reduced to the level of an object. The hollowness and hypocrisy characterizing the traditional marriage in the Indian male-oriented societal framework is given a full-throated expression by De in her novel *Second Thoughts*. Through the effective portrayal of Maya, De re-affirms the fact that in a male dominated society like India, woman is fated to suppression and oppression right from her childhood. The fanciful illusion of womenfolk end as a shattered reality and this status serves the essence of Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*.

Maya

Shobha De's Maya, who is a representative of the average Indian women, is forced to believe and follow such traditional dictates throughout her life. All her aims, ambitions and her desires are ruthlessly suppressed by her 'patriarchal' parents in the beginning, later by her husband and the society in general. Being a protagonist of De, Maya differs from others by the dual personality that prevails within her. On the one side, the conventional tradition-bound concepts and values highlighting the passivity in women instilled in her by the traditional background as well as the over-dominating attitude of her mother turn her to be a passive introvert. And on the other, an inborn feministic instinctual urge to be unique, to be different from others, to achieve something, to live life in its fullest sense prompts her to revolt against patriarchal superiority. As a result, Maya remains sensitive to all acts of female subordination.

Silent Introvert

A life of continuous suppression turns Maya into a silent introvert who creates an isolated world for herself where she moans and cries to herself. Though Maya appears to play the role of an obedient daughter to her parents only too well, it is within her psychological self that Maya is torn into pieces. Gupta comments that in the Indian society, "whatever may be the intensity of the tortures undergone by them, girls have to keep everything within the four walls of the house lest the family honour should be at stake" (149).

Marriage

The idealized version of marriage being based on mutual reciprocation and equality between the sexes provides fulfilment and satisfaction to both the husband and wife in their marital life. However, in a male-dominated society, marriage provides the man with unquestionable power to be exerted over his wife, which results in enslaving and subduing the woman, thereby severing the wife off her individuality. The wife becomes the 'other' in a phallocentric man's life. The same happens to Maya.

Once the marriage ceremony is over, Maya's aspirations are shattered by her unsympathetic husband Ranjan. Though an American returned and successfully working in a Bank, Ranjan is still a

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conservative and a male chauvinist in his dealings with his wife. Maya who had undergone an almost antagonistic childhood and of course adulthood, is confronted with an equally horrible and unfavourable situation provided by her married life.

Ranjan and Maya

Ranjan fails to consider Maya as an individual with feelings and emotions of her own. Maya is like a caged bird who has been under the restrictions not to use installed facilities of her house. There is a shadow of male dominance over every aspect and activities of her life. Patriarchy reduces woman to be the state of object. Her identity exists largely as 'being for itself '.Virginia Woolf rightly states, "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant" (10).

Ranjan is an egoist who tries to establish his superiority over his wife by suppressing her and forcefully denying her the freedom and self-respect of her as a human being. He ruthlessly denies her the opportunity to experience the city of her dreams. This leaves Maya longing, "If only he'd be more enthusiastic about sharing his city with me" (97). Analysing Maya's critical condition, Saxena remarks:

It troubles her [Maya] to see that Ranjan refuses to share a single aspect of his life with her. She wonders whether he considers her his rival or does not have enough faith in her [...]. Under the same roof, they live as strangers. (265)

Yearning for Freedom
Naturally, Maya feels worthless, ineffectual and hollow. She losses interest in life and turns out to be a secluded being who recoils within herself. It is pathetic when Maya realizes that marriage leads a woman to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (Beauvoir 500). Maya, in her inner consciousness decries tradition and strives to relieve herself from the tradition bound marriage with Ranjan. In her imagination, Maya is able to break away from tradition and take decisions of her own. But in reality, she is forced to remain bound by the societal concept of marriage.

Maya's longing to express herself and make her life purposeful by pursuing a career is crushed down by her ego- centered, male-chauvinist husband. Maya is left to yearn for the kind of freedom which banana selling woman enjoyed. Maya is left to admire, "how lucky she was to be outside. In the midst of people earning for herself and nurturing another life" (87). When marriage proves futile, unable to confront reality, Maya is forced to live in a world of illusion. Saxena clearly explains the mental condition of Maya, under the influence of which she gets entangled herself in a relationship with Nikhil, her college-going neighbour. Maya's mental strain is explained by the critic thus:
Maya is constantly depressed because of her crippling loneliness. There is no one in Bombay with whom she can share her miseries. She pities herself for doing nothing in a city that is not her own. There is no one with whom she can giggle or confess her problems. She feels useless. The feeling of being unwanted gnaws her. (266)

Developing Relationship with Nikhil
Maya, therefore wants to be of some meaning to someone who would really respect her feelings and have concern for her. Unable to free herself of the mental strain caused by her ruined married life,

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utter loneliness and confusion, Maya reaches such a critical state where she boldly seeks to take revenge upon Ranjan's inhuman attitude by getting entangled in a sexual relationship with Nikhil. Nikhil is foil to Ranjan. She remembers Nikhil's complaints, his cutting remarks, his frankness. She learns to love herself, her appearance, her existence, etc. due to Nikhil's company. This is significant change in her. She feels that a new woman has taken up in her. She has been recognized, accepted and completely cared. She has broken the norms for once while others have ignored it for ages.

The inexperienced Maya, living in a world of illusion, dreams of Nikhil to be her ideal lover who would surely rescue her from such a monotonous and accursed family life. When Nikhil comes into Maya's life, he brings a new meaning of existence for her. Her dreams and desires once again regenerated. It is he who gives her an exposure to Mumbai city. Maya wants to be free, alive, and reckless and go mad with joy.

With Ranjan, she has only seen the closed door of her house and the iron bars of the windows. Now she comes face to face with the Bombay she has craved for. She wants to flirt with the other Bombay. She is in search of adventure and she indulges in it now. With Ranjan she has learnt to curb her feelings. If she ever saw pictures of exotic resorts in magazines, she just shut her eyes and placed herself in the azure blue of the pool or the inviting mountains, but now she gets the chance to feel the tingling excitement in reality.

Exploiting Innocent Maya

Nikhil, being an experienced Bombayite, had in fact cunningly exploited the innocent Maya by his shrewdness. But when it comes to reality, Nikhil knows very well that he cannot be carried away by his temporary romantic stance with Maya, a married woman. So, he readily accepts to marry the girl of his mother's choice. Maya's world of illusion breaks down when she realizes how readily her 'ideal lover' Nikhil, who had been in reality a perfect opportunist, has accepted to marry another girl.

It is at this juncture that Shobha De throws light on the reality of the people who fall in Nikhil's category: again a typical attitude of people who belong to his class Nikhil, too, seems to have pre-conceived notions of marriage. He is the product of the modern generation, a man who does not mind taking one-night-stands with frustrated married women. But when it comes to marriage, it is arranged one. Nikhil's mother Pushpa breaks the news to Maya, about her son's engagement, with obvious pride. While Maya is dreaming of the glorious relationship that she would have with Nikhil, he is already in Delhi wooing his would-be bride.

Wallow in Her Misery

Now Maya is "left to wallow in her misery" (165). The brief adventure, magic and romance is all over revealed very abruptly. Maya stands motionless and speechless. Her mind goes blank. There is a total block out. Not that Maya is unaware of Nikhil's liaisons with other married women but perhaps with the satisfaction she gets in his presence, she does not give much thought to this aspect. Nikhil takes her once that his diary is crammed with the travel schedules of various husbands and he is always hooked up with bored housewives. Nikhil takes advantage of the limitations and weaknesses of lonely ladies and Maya is just an addition to his endless list. For him, such relations are only a stop-gap arrangement before the formal, recognized nuptial.

Even after undergoing bitter experience at the hands of male chauvinists, Maya is not strong willed and lacks the courage to step out of her meaningless tradition bound marriage with Ranjan. However, Maya is able to realize that, "there is no escape route in a tightly organized tradition bound society" (Jacob 31). Maya gains maturity as a result of the bitter experiences where she is determined to take control of her life, which itself is a mode of self-assertion.

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A Second Thought

Maya as a matured woman exhibits the mental strength to give her marital life a second thought where she is bold enough to confront the sultriness of not only Mumbai but also her own life. Maya who had as a vibrant college student dreamt "about becoming a journalist and changing the world" (141) is able to make a compromise with reality where she may not be averse to make a fresh beginning in life with her husband for she has, "all the time in the world now" (289). Thus, Maya is able to overcome the influence of illusion in her life and accommodate herself with reality.

Slice of Urban Life

Shobha De's novels are a slice of urban life. They deal with contemporary issues. In this context, *Second Thoughts* is a realistic representation of the psyche of the traditional Indian men and women. Although they claim to be the proud products of the twenty-first century, but deep down they still cherish and nourish the age- old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of men and women has hardly undergone any change. As individuals, they may have progressed but in the institution of marriage, the man is still the lord and master and a woman has to abide by his whims and fancies whether she likes it or not.

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

Maya's marriage with Ranjan was not a satisfied life to her, because of her loneliness and lack of her identity so, she goes for another choice with Nikhil is an illusion and later she realizes and rejoins with Ranjan and accepts her life is a Reality. Thus, Maya is considered to be the new woman and the traditional woman.

To Conclude

Thus, Shobha De's *Second Thoughts* is a successful attempt to bring about the plight of the New Woman who is concerned in the maze of domestic chores and takes up unconventional decision to assert her individuality and establish her identity. Here Maya is a new woman who is prepared to face the consequences of her choices. Her protest is not for equality but for the right to the acknowledged as an individual- capable of intelligence and feeling. Here the new woman is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general currents of patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs.

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