

Stupidity and Vanity of the Modern Women in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

Dr.G.Nageswara Rao¹, Associate Professor of English, Department of Applied Sciences & Humanities, VFSTR Deemed to be University, Vadlamudi, Guntur, A.P. India.

Dr. Dasam Sridevi², Asst. Professor, Department of English, VR Siddhartha College, Vijayawada.

**Paper Received on 10-11-2022, Accepted on 22-12-2022,
Published on 27-12-22;DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.41**

Abstract:

Shobha De is a modern novelist, who presents the aristocratic Urban Indian society in her novels. Her novels are most catchy as they have day-to-day moral values. They hit the human heart and mind directly. They present the woman's challenge to the patriarchal society, that is, women are no longer doormats to be trod upon and dirtied. Her women, no longer, submit to the age-old traditional values and social practices. Shobha De is tireless and unhindered in depicting the lifestyles of the rich society aristocrats in general and the women in particular. She is frank and blunt in her presentations. She has brought out the quite different characters and values of new woman whom she ceaselessly portrays in almost all her novels. Her women are highly individualistic, calculative and self-centred. They have extreme independence and recklessness. She writes in a realistic way and does not care for poetic or decorative description. She writes freely and deals with man and woman relations in a very open way. She never hesitates in sexually explicit words without any fear of disapproval from the average conservative Indian reading public. This paper presents the stupidity and the vanity of the women in modern society who break the tradition, cross the age-old formidable boundaries and setup a life of their own.

Keywords: Modernity, Individuality, Patriarchal Society, Suppression, Women Rights.

Shobha De' portrayal of the modern woman is entirely different from that of other modern novelists in Indian Writing in English. Her woman presents a new concept of morality. They defy social conventions and live a life of their own. They are mostly from the upper strata of Indian society. Shobha De's women are not involved in traditional Indian woman's struggle against social traditions, customs and cultural restrictions. Most of her women characters are in away free from the traditional social customs and values that suppress and oppress them. They seek equal rights with men and choose the friendship of men who can give them enjoyment, comfort, luxury and fulfillment of their desired aims, ambitions and dreams as it happens in the marriage of

Mikki, Karuna, Anjali and Maya. For these women, marriages are only for convenience. They are modern, sophisticated and westernized. In a way, they try to break the stereotype doles. The portrayal of women over them ears has been summed up succinctly by Paul Sukrita Kumar thus:

Woman is delineated as a mother and protector, an inspirer and cherisher, as Shakti the primal force and as the chaste, suffering wife or then, as a character. [...] Women in literature, as in life, have been projected generally as an instrument secondary to the realization of man and his destiny. A woman has been perpetually fortified and reinforced within the prison of images of static perfection. The free scope of growth and self-realization could not be accorded to her unless the accepted convenient stereotyping of woman's roles was disturbed. (41-42)

The self-realization and the growth seen in the new generation of modern women are due to their excessive exposure to Westernized life, education, economic freedom, power, and fame. Devy has rightly said, "Classical India became 'glorious,' and British India became 'progressive,' but the intervening centuries became, culturally, a period of continuous vulgarization" (5). She was falling in line with the rich, even middle-class, educated women too to aspire for the same freedom, comfort, and enjoyment without having any morality. They are ready for a highly paid, lucrative job and a sophisticated and comfortable lifestyle. They are tempted to be in the high social circle, as it is with Karuna and Anjali in *Socialite Evenings*. In the initial stages, Karuna took to modeling, and Anjali became an air hostess. The next step to attain fame and wealth is to marry a rich business man. "The prime concern of all Shobha De women is marriage" (Sarada 53)

They think that marriage is only a passport to get social status, a matter of convenience as it is with Karuna. If this is not fulfilled, they are ready to throw away the man, and move on to the next man as in the case of Anjali. Their definition of morality is what suits them, as they feel satisfied in whatever they do. They are self-obsessed, wildly reckless and feel justified in their actions, thereby leaving their own children also to choose the same path, they are into. In order to get power, fame and equal status with men, they are ready for any sort of compromise.

The cross section of the Indian upper middle class and upper class women has a different outlook. They seek the friendship of men, who can give them unending supply of physical comfort, money and luxury. They select men who can satisfy all their wants. Even living singly does not worry them, if they are able to satisfy their wants otherwise. At this juncture, it is worthwhile to note how marriage was considered in the past:

Our Epics, Vedas and Puranas envisage marriage not as a mere social instrument, but also as a moral weapon to both stabilize and elevate the moral stature of an individual. But unfortunately, it is an irony of fate that in a post-modernistic world, such esteemed institutions are currently subject to doubt, cynicism and erosion. (Sarada 57)

The modern women appear on different roles from the ones they are shown to play in traditional family novels. They marry but do not have any faith on the institution of marriage. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* is brought up in a traditional family. She praises system initially. She is proud of her father's contribution in maintaining discipline in the family, in helping her mastering the classics, the mother in her obedience, attending the calls of the father, and bringing up the children. Herein Shobha De brings in Anjali in to the life of Karuna, and her change over a pattern of life style. De's picturisation of these socialites is to ring a warning bell to her readers. A graphic life pattern of the socialite is pictured, so that reader's especially young women could understand what the world is like. Woman today is not bothered about tolerance or adjustments. She expects complete freedom, to enjoy her needs and wants. Karuna very easily forgets her friendship with her good old friend Bunty, switches over to the man who sends her orchids. She is bold enough to tell her husband of her friendship with his friend Krish and her proposed visit to Venice with him. She is not bothered about the family and at the slightest provocation is ready to break the ties. She is rash in her decisions, passionate in her enjoyments. Woman breaks the families and homes into fragments, with such a ferocity as that is involved in a nuclear fission. The resultant effect is futility and isolation.

Karuna is unable to change her husband to satisfy her little fancies that fly like a butterfly in her mind. She finds fault with him. But her husband allows her to enjoy her day with his friend Krish and later on pardons her also for the mistakes she commits. It is not a mistake on the part of Karuna's husband to question her pregnancy. *You'd better ask yourself whose child you're carrying – Poor Krish – I suppose you'll palm it off as his. But I have my doubts even about that* (SE 342). It is of course marriage to a life of loneliness. Even then, her husband has been considerate and is generous in helping her and offering her money for her stay, *How are you for cash? Is your cheque book with you? I'll send some money across tomorrow. In any case, you can't go on living in Anjali's house. My mother wanted to tell you that if you need anything, you can phone her* (SE 354).

Self-assertion, self-respect and self-recognition seem to have become the marks of the evolving women. For these women, sex is no more a taboo, there is no inhibition and no holding back. Bodily needs are not neglected. Premarital or extra-marital affairs hold no terror to them. The language they use is bold, brushing aside inhibitions. They have full appetite for life and the capacity to take in the odd swigs or swags that fall to their lot in the course of their winning spree.

Modern women like Karuna and Anjali are not ready to follow the laid down rules and regulations, and are least bothered about the society. They defy tradition. Conformists stick on to traditional values, even at the expense of individual happiness. Traditionalists readily sacrifice their happiness. But a modernist is not ready for suffering and sacrifices, but is always ready to project her individuality. Modern woman's aims, happiness and

aspirations are the most important for them. This nature which craves for individuality, ultimately results in the breakup of family and relationships.

Most of Sobha De's women are from the rich aristocratic society of Mumbai, and they want to be masters of their own lives. They are confident and assertive in whatever they do. They expect satisfaction for themselves. They are not ready for any kind of silent submission, but ready for challenges. For these women, marriage is a game and husbands are mere playmates. If they are not satisfied with the game and the playmate, they are ready to change them, and choose the next immediately. They are not ready to be mere puppets or play things, but demand equal partnership with men in everything that goes on in life. They know to decide what is best for them, and their prerogative is to lead a life that pleases them much.

Modern women's exposure to the new world and new ideas, make them more individualistic, independent and assertive. Karun's trip to New York and London, her meeting with the ad film-maker gave her a feeling of superiority and assertiveness. On returning home she says, "I felt reckless and brave. Adventure and liberated" (SE 69) and the trip became the turning point in her life. Her "Brave New world trip" (SE 70), as she said, "I decided that I would be a big brave girl and go home" (SE 75). It is her overseas trip that made her break her relationship with her boyfriend Bunty. Inna Walter rightly comments:

Karuna's stay in the US was enough to give her a feeling of superiority and made her assertive. She returned home to find her sisters "provincial and pesky". She had discovered "privacy" and "space", commodities that were lacking at home. Her final break with Bunty, a loving and caring companion of four years, came when she discovered his 'ordinaries'. (53)

Bunty may be weak in his financial condition, but is a caring and affectionate person. Dismissing him, Karuna enters into marriage with big dreams. Karuna expected "a marriage full of laughter and conversation. One in which the two of us were perfectly in tune, speaking the same language, thinking the same thoughts, enjoys the same things" (SE 99). But after marriage, Karuna finds the man to be unexciting, untutored and uninspiring, and she is able to understand. "I wasn't wife material. We were both solitary creatures with solitary dreams who simply weren't cut out for domesticity with all its trappings" (SE 103) and my husband and I inhabited different planets" (SE 99). Karuna detested his compulsive socializing, "How I detested these empty evenings. The men would talk 'bijness' over their Black Dogs and women would stare at their diamond-studded Piaget watches and wait to go home". (SE 135) and "phone, fix up, Dress up-Buzz off. Get bored. Come back, sleep" (SE 134)

Karuna is disillusioned with marriage. "My marriage went sour because I'd married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time" (SE 94). Hence, her search for a right partner to satiate her physical and emotional need starts. When she starts

an obsessive affair with Krish, her husband's friend, she accuses her husband, *"You really made me sick. I think our marriage was over, the day our awful honeymoon started. We've 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 (SE 184-85).*

Thus, bored with the uninteresting husband, as she, "got married in a mad rush" (SE 83) and entered into a "pretty terrific marriage" (SE 91). She tries to drive away the boredom in crossword puzzles. But with her friend Anjali's advice, *"your marriage isn't fantastic, but it isn't a total write-off either. If you can have both a boring husband in the home and an exciting lover on the sidelines perfect (SE 273)*, Karuna enters into an extra-marital affair with her husband's friend Krish, and ultimately breaks her relationship with the husband by divorce. She walks out of the house. She is not heartbroken. Circumstances compel her to abort the child, and finally she is made to call her body her own. For her, *"women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single" (SE 94)*

A woman in Indian society marries not just the man but also his family and subsequently loses her identity in marriage, relinquishes her freedom and sets about pleasing everybody. But the new generation of women with their new-found release from matrimonial bondage; adopt different perspectives, and revolt against the old order. (Swain 135)

In a traditional background, men can have any number of mistresses but women without any question, have to accept them silently. The modern women break all these theories. They not only have secret love affair within the bond of marriage, but also have many number of boyfriends as the husbands have girlfriends. They are even ready to talk about their passionate relationship with other men to their husbands as Karuna speaks to her husband about her affair with his own friend Krish. Karuna has no remorse, when she speaks about it:

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'm not the flighty sort. I don't flirt at random like my other friends. I'm steady and grounded. It's the Taurean in me that's 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. (SE 296)

Karuna identifies the modern way of living, *"We leave each other alone. You try not to get into my hair and I try not to get into yours. That's the best possible combination" (SE 296)*. Karuna's friend Anjali marries Abe, divorces him, flirts with many men, finally marries Kumar for his wealth and social standing. Marriage for these women is full of pretensions as Karuna points out:

We treated marriage like a skin allergy an irritant all right, but not something that would totally incapacitate us. We had our own secret lives and by that I do not mean clandestine affairs. But these were our private worlds, inaccessible to the men we had married. (SE 99)

Modern woman is ready to exploit any number of men to attain her goal in life and to improve her career prospects. After her divorce, Karuna tries to build her career and gets acquainted with many men. She is not anxious to marry them, despite the proposals extended by them. Her mother suggests, “*You meet so many men. Take your time, but marry and marry the right one – that is important ... Before we die, we want to see you secure and at peace*” (SE 441). But Karuna questions her thus:

But Mother, why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. 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'm not answerable to anyone. I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage ... I can't make any “sacrifices” – not now. (SE 441-2)

As long as these women consider themselves modern, marriage and family are of secondary importance. Personal desires are of utmost importance. Social approval has only a very minor role to play in women's life. They are only bothered about their needs, their emotions, and sentiments. When the dreams of these modern women do not materialize, women who are emotionally less stable may be crushed, but Shobha De's woman like Karuna is strong; she walks out of the marriage and re-work her dreams.

Jealousy is another trait that is found in these women. Anjali feels jealous about Karuna's expensive Lanvin watch, the exotic white and purple orchids on her bedroom table, and her jealousy grew all the more when Karuna's husband rose in the Bombay business community's “pecking order” (Walter 53)

The modern women's desire to live to the fullest sense with the company of socialites, having any number of extramarital affair ends in a neglected life. Only when they realize that they are not going to gain anything out of the extra-marital affair, as it happens in the case of Karuna they find true meaning of their dreams. They reject the idea of getting married again and readily accept a life on their own terms. Thus, only by a trial and error method, they come to terms with life and start philosophizing. Realization comes only after enjoying all the fun and frolic in life. Money and success become secondary in their life.

Ritu in *Socialite Evening* has a new definition, new strategy to keep her husband within her reach, as she observes:

“The trick is to make them feel you've done them a favour by marrying them. Once you achieve that, the equation works out’. ‘The other trick’, she confided, ‘is to

make them feel insecure.' Let them think you'll walk out on them if they don't toe the line. That's what keeps them in their place.' (SE129).

Modern women know the tricks to keep their marriage going, either to keep the men in their place or to kick them out of marriage. They consider their pre-marital and post-marital intimacy, not as a sin but as a part of growing up. A man thinks, he can have any number of sexual liaisons with various women, but considers it a taboo for women. The modern women want to break it. Seema Suneel comments on marriage and man-woman relationship in this novel thus:

In the fictional cosmos of the book, the family is crumbling and marriage comes to be re-defined. The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom, with no notion of marital fidelity ... Marriage arrangement ... appears more like a contract than a living, vibrant, emotional relationship (15).

The modern women with all their episodes of love and licentious relationships become liberated women at last and enjoy their independence and the space they have carved for themselves. They become contented. Karuna life in *Socialite Evenings* is an example of a modern woman who finds happiness in her independence and the new-found space, after her experimentation with love, marriage, and extra marital relationships. At last, the revelation comes to her, not to yield to the bondage of marriage. She, at last, declines the invitation of Ranbir Roy to accompany him to Washington as an assistant, even though she had a relationship with him, and also gives up her attraction towards the intellectual snobbery of Girish. She feels happy with the fact, "Single in good for me" (SE489).

The modern woman is Janus-faced, traditional as well as modern. Though she is modern in her outlook, she has to confront a tradition-oriented society. Hence she learns the trick, to live under the twin whips of heritage and modernity. Tradition teaches that with marriage, all the problems in woman's life get solved, but on the contrary, for a modern woman all the problems start with marriage. It shatters all her dreams and the crude reality presents a perplexing situation; hence a deviation from the established traditional norms. Only after experiencing her dreams, she realizes her real self.

Sex finds a free play in this modern setup. The modern woman may sacrifice herself, for the happiness and wellbeing of the family, but not her individuality and space. She may serve the family, she may be accommodative, adjustable, but not blindly. She wants herself to be accepted as an individual. She is ready to revolt, question, rebel when the existing rules give her a secondary place in society. There is always a craving for individuality and yearning for happiness. When she is not able to earn this in her family, she is ready to break up relationships. This yearning for liberty, makes her expect a social order where she can be, as she wishes. She is not for any hypocrisy, and expects her character to be judged by the purity of heart and not by the chastity of the body.

The traditional Indian woman lived at the mercy of the man, with no identity, dignity or individuality. But the modern Indian woman, with the advent of aping the west, started to have liberal views, enlightened ideas. She demands equal rights and liberty. With all these, she has started to explore love and sex. Educational enlightenment sees her explore a new world.

Shobha De's novels present a totally new concept of life. Her female protagonists long for singleness. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*, feels that being in a state of singleness, she can experience independence, so that she can live life on her own terms and conditions. It is her perception of leading a beautiful life all alone and independently.

The modern woman is ready to engage herself in any field, on par with men. Moreover, she is attracted towards the glamorous world of acting, modeling, designing and advertising. She expects the society to look at her as modern, sophisticated and westernized. The expectation and demand of the modern generation is for mutual co-operation and mutual respect for each other. When this is not found, she revolts, questions and challenges the hierarchy of men in her life. She is educated, hence assertive, so she passes on the message to the world of men, that she can also do the same thing, they do. She is not ready to be bound by the traditional moral codes that form the basis of a conservative Indian family. For her "marriage is a formality and a matter of personal convenience" (Ningthoujam 123). When the legitimate rights and demands of a modern woman are not recognized, rather denied, she becomes a rebel. She is not ready to be a silent sufferer any more. She wants to make a clean and clear pact with a man in all his undertakings and enjoyments. Hence, she is at times blunt and straight forward, so also her language. It may be seen socially unrefined, but it clearly conveys her intention. She starts searching for her needs, and is ready to get her biological and emotional demands outside marriage.

Shobha De's characters show the tendency to assert their potential as human beings struggling to have an identity independent of pre-ordained feminine essence. They try to throw away the myth that women's activities are essentially limited to certain spheres of life prescribed for women alone. Her presentation of these modern women, who roam about indulging in free sex, exhibiting uninhibited sexual behaviour, living a fashionable and wealthy life, is not for propagating a new and unchecked freedom, rather to show her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour in a subtle but effective way.

These women in their search for viable human relationships on equal terms and their assertion of control over their body and mind, tend to lose the difference that marks the existence of their separate feminine identity. "Their over-identification with the masculine traits of behavior result in the assimilation of their female identity into the male one and their voice as women again remains obliterated (Neb 247) Forgetting their separate feminine identity, these women behave and pose as men. In most of Shobha De's

novels, the underlying pattern that shapes the narrative structure is her cleverly and artistically embedded advice to these women to analyse their behavior and stop posing as men. May be the centuries of serfdom imposed on women by the patriarchal system of life blurs their vision to have an independent concept of women's existence and behavior. Hence, these women fail to create an image of woman uncorrupted by patriarchal understanding and independent of patriarchy. Greer views, "She would be a woman who did not embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon a man to endow her with identity and social status, a woman who did not have to be beautiful, who could be clever, who would grow in authority as she aged" (qtd. In Neb:248).

Conclusion

Breaking the shackles of the bond of marriage, walking out of wedlock, wrecking the family harmony and diluting the value systems are not an answer to women's problems. Whenever a system goes wrong, a solution has to be found to bring it back to normalcy, rather than a better condition. Therein lies the greatness of a man or woman. Woman is said to be all powerful, she can make or wreck a family. When that is the case, she can think of a better contribution, a better solution to the problems in family life. Creation is always difficult, but destruction is very easy. Shobha De's women being modern, tried their hand in different sort of enjoyment, lost in the materialistic world, blindly imitating the west, only to realise, "that there could be no genuine modernization through imitation. People could not abandon their own cultural heritage and yet succeed in internalizing the historical experience of other peoples" (Madan183).

References:

- De, Shobha. *Socialite Evenings*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.
- Ahuja, Ram. *Indian Social System*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2009.
- Chandra, Subhash. "Family and Marriage in *Socialite Evenings*" *Shobha De*.
 ---. "The Image of Man in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*". *Indian Women Novelists. Set I. Vol I*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 1991.
- Dwivedi, Sunita and P. C. Mishra. "Marital Happiness an Attitude" *Psyche of Indian Women*. Ed. Aradhana Shukla. New Delhi: Concept, 2013.
- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *The Adventure of Criticism*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1955.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Writing Women across Cultures*. New Delhi: Rawat, 2002.
- Khan, A. G. "Shobha De Vatsyayani". *Fiction of the Nineties*. Eds. Veena Noble and R. K. Dhawan Dass. New Delhi: Prestige, 1994.
- Krishnaswamy, Shantha. *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Ashish, 1984.
- Madan, T. N. "Tradition and Modernity in the Sociology of D. P. Mukerji". *Social and Cultural Diversities*. Ed. Abha Avasthi. Jaipur: Rawat, 1977.

- Neb, N. K. "Feminist Narrative Stance: A Study of Shobha De's Novels". *Indian English Literature: Vol IV*. Ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003.
- Ningthoujam, L. Sonia. *Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2006.
- Sarada, T. "Women in Shobha De – A Feminist Perspective". *Women's Writing in India: New Perspectives*. Ed. K. V. Surenderan. New Delhi: Sarup, 2002.
- Singh, Neelam and Rashmi G. "Depiction of women in the Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya and Shobha De: A Contrastive Study". *Indian Writing in English: A Critical Study*. Ed. K. A. Agarwal. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003.
- Singh, Yogendra. *Culture Change in India: Identity and Globalization*. New Delhi: Rawat, 2002.
- . *Modernization of Indian Tradition*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2009.
- Suneel, Seema. "The Theme of Man Woman Relationship in Contemporary Indian Fiction". *Man-Woman Relationship in Indian Fiction*. Ed. Seema Suneel. New Delhi: Prestige, 1995.
- Swain, S. P. "Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* – A Feminist Study". *Feminist English Literature*. Ed. M. K. Bhatnagar. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2002.
- Tiwari, Shubha. "Women's Liberation Movement and Indian Women Novelists". *Indian Women Writers*.
- Verma, Shivika. "The Novels of Shobha De: A Feminist Study". *Indian Writings in English*. Eds. Binod Mishra and Sanjay Kumar. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006.
- Walter, Inna. "Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*: An Initiation Tale from Innocence to Experience". *Fiction of the Nineties*.

How to cite this article?

Dr.G.Nageswara Rao & "Stupidity and Vanity of the Modern Women in Shobha De's Socialite Evenings" Research Journal Of English(RJOE)7(4),PP:336-345,2022, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.41