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Women under the Patriarchal Dominance in the Select Novels of Shobha De

Abstract

Shobha De probes into the fathoms of the psyche of the modern woman and her cares and worries in her fiction. She explores the world of the modern urban woman as her novels are the slice of urban life. They deal with the contemporary issues related to subjugated and marginalized women such as marital incompatibility, identity crisis, oppression and male chauvinism. She realistically presents an intimate side of urban woman's life in her novels and reveals her plight in the present day society. It is a fact that the woman is a victim everywhere as per the prevalent social norms. She gets trapped within the set moral codes and norms of the society and consequently leads an unhappy life. 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 in patriarchal set up. As she has been the subordinate i.e. 'the second sex', she has to conform to male standards. The term 'man' usually stands for the entire human race, while 'woman' refers silence and patience. 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. Woman is always yoked under the burden of career as well as family responsibilities. She has to pay attention to her career as well as home at the stake of her potentialities. Woman is caught in between tradition and modernity and her

dilemmatic fluid status finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by the women novelists. Shobha De's concern with the different aspects of a woman's life makes her portray a variety of women and to illustrate 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 discontent with their lot of subordination in the home and society. But recently, numerous women have expressed their discontent with their ill- treatment and inferior status and strived for equality with men. They have protested and agitated for equal fundamental rights.

Keywords: Marginalization, male dominance, marriage, tradition, modernity, sex.

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. Naturally, she does not have independent status and is supposed to perform all the household duties and 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 chores, she does not have economic independence. Moreover, it is a 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 points out :

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without a 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 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)

It is in this context, one can understand the marginalization of Indian women is under the authority of their husbands. In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna, the protagonist of the novel plays different roles at different times to fulfill her emotional needs. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer. In order to escape from her middle class environment, she indulges into the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, a prominent socialite in Mumbai. She thinks that the fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status that will fulfill her desires. Karuna represents a modern urban woman to whom, career is prior to everything. She distinguishes herself with her idea of emancipation and her uncompromising attitude towards the legacy of orthodoxy and conservatism. In order to cater the needs of modern world as she craves for, Karuna, later on gets married to a young rich man. Soon, she realizes the failure of her marriage. She thinks that she has married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Karuna has been locked up in a meaningless marriage. The relationship between Karuna and her husband is strained. It is strange and mechanical.

Lack of communication and emotional attachment between them made her life dull and meaning less. Besides this, her humiliation by her husband brings out the sad plight of women. Thus, as a wife, Karuna serves the perfect example of a miserable Indian woman.

Subjugation and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is well reflected in the novel *Starry Nights* by the portrayal of women characters such as Aasha Rani, Geetha Devi and Malini. In one way or the other, they suffer at the hands of men. They are not only oppressed, exploited and humiliated in the film industry but also in the society. A lot of suffering and trouble were meted out to Geetha Devi, Aasha Rani's mother as she was deserted by her husband. While rearing her daughters, she struggled and fought against

poverty. The circumstances forced her to work even as a prostitute to earn money, support the family and pay the fees for the dance lessons of Aasha Rani. Living in slums, she had to experience numerous hardships and face humiliation and exploitation. She was meek and subservient by temperament. As a result, she was threatened, abused, neglected and finally deserted by her husband.

Aasha Rani's life clearly substantiates the fact that, in a patriarchal society a woman has to perpetually struggle for rightful existence. Deprived of parental love and emotional security, Aasha Rani has to face hardships such as starvation and poverty since her childhood. Besides, she was sexually exploited by her own uncle due to the lack of parental protection. This incident brings out the hypocrisy of the male-centered and male-dominated value system of Indian society. But Aasha Rani is the most unfortunate victim of her own merciless mother. Forgetting the mother's role as a savior, she compels, Aasha Rani into the world of pornographic films and at the very young age, thrown into the film industry for the sake of money. It is the mother who forces her daughter to please and impress Bollywood personalities in order to get chances and thus plays the role of an exploiter of her own daughter.

Aasha Rani reaches at the top in her profession and falls in love with another top hero Akshay Arora, a married man. She has to suffer a lot due to this relationship. She is humiliated and insulted by Akshay's wife Malini who curses her for unnecessary intrusion in her marriage. He is a typical representative of the patriarchal society. He keeps enjoying both the worlds- with his wife Malini as a husband, and with Aasha Rani as her lover and bed-mate.

In patriarchy, marriage is considered as the most important event. It is a solution to their problems and an ultimate goal in life. For the young women in India, the main motto in life is to be successful in marriage market. Akshay's wife Malini voices this traditional attitude towards marriage. She is an educated woman with a good cultural background, a woman of career and a gazal singer. Akshay Arora, a top star of Bollywood, chooses Malini as his wife not out of love but with a different purpose.

Malini is a typical Indian woman, submissive by nature, sacrifices her career in preference to her husband's happiness. Akshay, keeps her just as a housewife and he does not want Malini to share all his joys and sorrows. But, for Malini her husband is everything. Therefore, on the very day of her marriage Malini declares to give up her career. She says : "My husband means more to me than a career. I believe a wife's place is in the home, not in a recording studio. Akshay is an old fashioned man. I will never displease him." (SN 67)

Thus, the character of Malini, has been created by the novelist as a representative of hundreds of such women who lead the life of slavery, misery and suffering from the day they give up their career in preference to marriage. When a man marries, he does not have to sacrifice his career but when a woman marries the first condition is giving up of her career. This act on the part of women enslaves her for the rest of her life because of her financial dependence on her husband. There is no choice left other than to accept and comply with the whims of her husband.

Shobha De very intelligently exposes the evil practices prevalent in the society such as gender discrimination, subordinate status of women and double standards. It is hypocritical on the part of Akshay Arora to expect devotion and faithfulness from his wife when he himself involves in a number of extra-marital affairs. Malini has lost her identity and

individuality. She, therefore, fits into the image of a traditional Indian woman and appears to be more like a bird in a cage.

Patriarchal dominance is also well exhibited in her novel *Second Thoughts*. The arranged matrimony between Ranjan Malik and Maya is doomed to failure because of their entirely different attitudes to life. In spite of his western upbringing, he wants to lead a traditional life and he expects the same from his wife. Maya on the other hand, fails to accept his wish and as a freedom-loving girl, she craves to lead a free life. She desires to be an ideal wife, but Ranjan, completely obsessed with his mother, fails to understand his wife's needs and her desire for freedom.

Ranjan expects her to do all the domestic works and sarcastically remarks when she fails to do it perfectly. Often Ranjan reminds her of 'tradition' and of the 'law laid down in our Shastras'. When Maya wants to pursue a career in textile designing after marriage, Ranjan rejects the plan. Behind this decision lies Ranjan's ego and he projects himself as the lord and master. Maya has to abide by his whims and fancies, whether she likes it or not. He always reminds her of her duties as a married woman. He says: "a housewife's duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top. That is where her true happiness lies. You've seen my mother's house – learn from her" (ST 56). Thus the contrasting attitudes make her feel discontented. Hence, Maya always ponders: "Modern life is so lonely. So lonely. Nobody to talk to. Nobody to share anything with." (91)

Ranjan's responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a decent house and four square meals a day. "As far as he was concerned, he had redeemed his pledge" (368). It is up to Maya to accept or reject it. Ranjan tries to control his wife, locks STD facility on phone and has full control even on the use of the air conditioner. She cannot share her feelings with anyone; even she cannot bear any child because of her husband's lack of interest in physical-gratification and on top of that, she has nothing creative

to do in that city. Neb observes that “Maya has to experience the pangs of loneliness, isolation and a feeling of being a non person only due to the unresponsive, selfish and suppressive nature of her husband.”(166)

Through Maya, Shobha De tries to present the suffering, agony and silence of Indian women who accept marriage as their fate. Despite the efforts of emancipated women, Maya has been deserted by her lover Nikhil and forced her to seek the fold of tradition. Life is harsh and bitter reality that has to be suffered silently by a woman. Maya has no choice except to endure seclusion in her life. She wanted to establish her own identity and tried to rebel against the double standards of the society but failed to do so. This novel throws the light on the condition of Indian married woman who has been trapped and trodden between nature and custom. It projects not only the hollowness of Indian marriage but also the deception and insincerity in extra-marital relations which can never be an alternative to the marriage. The novel also depicts the psychology of men. Shobha de’s women do not seem to suffer from social problems. But they are agitated and irritated due to the sense of presumed male superiority. They resist the male attitude that decides and defines their existence and expects them to mould their life according to male desires.

Though in the Indian male dominated society, women are marginalized by their husbands, Shobha De’s women are certainly different. They have the ability to detest the indifferent and callous attitude of the husbands who keep themselves busy in drab monotonous activities like reading business pages of the newspapers. They try extra marital affairs as an antidote, which also end in failure. Finally they end up as loners in spite of their active socialization. Boredom and incompatibility are the main reasons behind the failure of relationships leading to loneliness and alienation in De’s novels.

It is a sad tale of a traditional and oppressed wife and at the same time a serious look at the modern marriage. Naturally, these prevailing norms restrict both the partners to definite

roles. A superior position to the husband in a male-dominated society is the unwritten law. Man considers it as his privilege to control the life of his female counterpart. All these ideas justify woman's constant subjugation in the family. The novelist suggests that woman in this kind of scenario cannot feel free and independent as she is unable to enjoy equal status. By presenting different aspects of female behavior, the novelist shows her deep concern for woman's suppression and suffering in a traditional Indian middle class family and thereby seeks to bring awareness about the predicament and emancipation of women.

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