



## THE IMAGE OF MARGINALIZED AND SUBJUGATED WOMEN IN SHOBHA DE'S 'SOCIALITE EVENINGS': A STUDY

**K.V.S. Maheswara Rao**

Lecturer in English, A.M.A.L. College, Anakapalle, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.

### ABSTRACT

*Shobha De is one of the most eminent and popular women novelists of contemporary Indian English fiction. She is a writer with multi-faceted personality. She 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 marginalized and subjugated women in the society. She realistically presents an intimate side of urban woman's life in her novels and at the same time reveals her plight in the present day society. Women are an integral part of human civilization. No nation or society can ever progress without active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of woman in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, one fact common to almost all societies is that 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 her traditionally assigned roles. Since times immemorial, a woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression and 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. Besides, many religions of the world have given sanction to the female's subjugation to the male members of the society.*



**KEYWORDS:** *Explores, Contemporary, Marginalized, Subjugated, Civilization, Traditionally, Biological and Oppression.*

Increasing awareness of injustice done to women slowly made them raise their voices against inequality and oppression. This female consciousness against male domination slowly led to the rise of Women's Liberation Movement in 1960 in Western Europe and United States. Since then it has become the most powerful social, cultural and political movement. It is a serious reform movement aiming at an upliftment of women in society. But though it emerged in 1960s, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action because the first voice in favor of women's rights was raised by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and also by the male contributors to this tradition such as John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and Friedrich Engels in his *The Origin of the Family* (1884). Moreover, during 1970s some radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Eva Fige in *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) and Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) advocated their theories of equality between men and women. It is a fact that the woman is a victim everywhere of the prevalent social

norms. She gets trapped within the set moral codes and social norms of the society and consequently leads an unhappy life. The woman of urban life is no exception to it.

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 is 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.

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. This unrest became known as 'the women question' that Bernard Shaw deals in his *Candida* (1955:93). 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. As Simone de Beauvoir (1987:16) points out: 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. It is in this context one can understand the marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands in patriarchal society.

In Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* (1989), 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 fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status that will fulfill her desires. Karuna represents a modern urban woman for whom her own career is prior to everything. She distinguishes herself by her own idea of emancipation and uncompromising attitude towards the legacy of orthodoxy and conservatism. But to adjust herself to the changing scenario and the modes of thought and way of living, Karuna, later on gets married to a young rich man. Soon, she realizes 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 devoid of affection. It is strange and mechanical. The absence of feeling and concern for each other is revealed in her words: We would lie there in the bedroom with the dull walls reading our respective magazines. He with *The Economist* and I with a film rag. If there was absolutely nothing better to do and we ran out of magazines, he would turn to me and nudge, 'Wife-how about it?' Neither the words nor the tone did anything to allay the disgust I usually felt. But it was simpler to just get on with the damn thing and have it over and done with as fast as possible. I would lie there staring at the ceiling as he pounded away. Or sometimes I would mentally review the day's accounts. I can never remember my thoughts being anything other than unedifying (SE 59). Lack of communication and emotional attachment between them made her life boring. She starts feeling as a well-trained Indian wife. Besides this, her humiliation by her husband brings out the sad plight of women. He says: You don't deserve me and my family. My mother had told me at the very beginning - "Find out more about this girl and her family. Are they like us? Will they fit in? Will she?" and I had given her a guarantee that you would be OK.

How wrong I was and how right she had been! (SE 178) Thus as a wife Karuna serves the perfect example of miserable Indian woman. She is frustrated due to her sterile marital life and marginalization. Referring to the non-responsive attitude of husbands, Shobha De points out that they are not evil men, but what they do to their wives is beyond evil. Karuna hates the callous attitude of her husband and the unbearable condition. She says: We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was 'You don't really count, except in the context of my priorities.' It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our heads and four square meals a day (SE 61).

Karuna's pathetic utterance evinces the plight of the marginalized Indian woman as her world is supposed to be restricted to 'hearth and dearth'. Karuna is able to recognize how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate insulting remarks or comments of men and are denied the right to live as autonomous beings. She recalls the bitter experience of her friend, a qualified surgeon. She was deliberately humiliated by her husband. He was of the opinion that she married him for money. Here it is obvious that though her husband is not cruel, certainly he tries to impose his superiority and subjugates her which we can visualize from the following statement of Karuna's friend: He brainwashes me constantly. I am made to feel obliged and in debt. It is awful but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house, has become a battleground. I don't know what to do - either way I am stuck (SE 61). Though Karuna and the women like her looked at marriage as a solution to their problems and a way to fulfill their desires, in reality shatters all their dreams and they suffer miserably in their wedded lives.

According to Shobha De, the Indian male rarely fulfils the requisites of a proper husband. In this patriarchal social set up woman is reduced to a mere object. Karuna's husband treats her as an object subjected to his own will. As a result there is a complete loss of her identity. In an attempt and a quest to fulfill her emotional and psychological needs, Karuna develops an extra-marital relationship with Krish, an old friend of her husband. Karuna's husband doubts this relationship which finally results in a divorce. But just before their separation, through the preventive act of forgiveness, her so called husband tries to assert his male superiority. He sarcastically threatens Karuna: I have thought over the whole thing carefully. I would have thrown you right now – but I am prepared to give you one more chance. I am not a mean man. You have been a good wife. I don't really have any major complaints against you. I am prepared to cancel this one black mark on your performance record and start with a clean slate. But you have to swear you will never see or keep in touch with that man again. I think I am being more than fair. No other husband would have reacted like this- but I said to myself, you are human, you have sinned, but I must be generous and forgive you (SE 176). Moreover, the condition of Karuna's two sisters, Swati and Alak, is not better. Swati is an engineer, whose husband has taken an English mistress and divorced her. Like Karuna, they also pass through similar traumatic experiences. They are victims of patriarchal social system. Nisha, the other female character in the novel is no more than a whore. The novelist demonstrates the ways of sexual harassment of females by males through these and many more examples.

Anjali and Ritu are the minor women characters who are friends of Karuna. They are presented as flat and stereotyped characters responsible for their plight. The male-dominated social context is, to a great extent, responsible for this. The women like Anjali and Ritu cannot have their own identities as independent women because the society in which they exist is male-dominated. The only identities allowed to them are: mothers, housewives or bedmates. Ritu, for example, is reduced to a mere doll by the wolfish males who always looked at her as a 'natural flirt'. According to Karan she is like an 'instant coffee' or an 'immediate pick-me-up'. The following dialogue of Ritu clearly reveals her oppression, exploitation and subjugation by her husband: He came at me like a maniac. First he pulled out his leather belt from the trouser and then he stood over me with his eyes blazing. Phatak! - I felt the leather on my arm, and I was so stunned I couldn't even scream. Before I could open my mouth, it landed on my arm again. I lost my balance - I was sitting on the edge of the carpet. He was still standing at the same spot with his arms raised. Suddenly I felt a sharp kick in my side and another one. Then I heard him say "Shit! There goes my bally shoe". Then he threw his

belt away and started to slap me around. One hard hit cracked against my nose - my nose was like a geyser with blood gushing from it (SE 121).

Frustrated Ritu gets divorce from her husband and is married to an underworld don - Gul. She is so much dependent on his mercy and promises to supply other women for his pleasure. As Ritu is financially dependent on Gul, he treats her malevolently. He humiliates her publicly. For instance, in one of the parties when Ritu picks a quarrel with starlet Sonia, it is Gul who beats Ritu in public. Anjali describes the incident to Karuna thus: Gul got into a fight with Ritu and struck her straight on the face. He also called her some filthy names - in Hindi. And do you know something? Nobody dared interfere. She just lay there on the ground while he kicked her, yanked her hair, spat on her and tore her blouse. (SE 212)

Anjali, a young socialite woman in the novel, also suffers much due to her incompatible marriage and her husband's oppressive attitude. While working as an Air hostess in Air India, Anjali marries Abe (Abbas Tyabji) but Abe's unfaithfulness and an attitude of indifference destroys her familial happiness. In one of the meetings, Anjali tells Karuna that she cuts her nails because her husband does not like her long nails. Thus she has to conform to her husband's wishes. Consequently, there is a complete loss of her identity, individuality and freedom. Later on, when she gets divorce from Abe, she goes from man to man to get hurt herself. Finally, she marries Kumar Bhandari to endanger herself as he is a homo-sexual and has relations with Murty and other young boys. She gets betrayed thus and turns to religion. The role of a traditional Hindu wife is thrust upon her. In short, the marital lives of Anjali, Ritu and Karuna illustrates that marriage subjugates and enslaves women. They fall victim to men because of their financial dependence. For instance, Anjali's fascination for men is twofold: physical beauty and wealth. Gul, the smuggler and underworld don, practically 'buys' Ritu. Here it seems that the dual interest of these women is, to some extent, responsible for their victimization and plights.

To conclude, these marginalized and subjugated women do not have the characteristics of New Women such as self-confidence, independence of spirit, clarity of thought, moral courage and emotional soundness. They are victimized because they lack purity of head, heart and character. Shobha De is frank and straightforward in depicting the suffering of women in her novels. The novel *Socialite Evenings* depicts the tainted images of the subjugation, subordination and marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Here, in presenting the picture of subordination and marginalization of Indian women, the novelist attack is not against individuals, but it is against the system that favors men and causes women's marginalization and subjugation in patriarchal society.

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