

## Feministic Shades with respect to Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

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### Abstract

Feminism as a movement has had a tremendous impact on almost all the genres of literature. It has enveloped people at large; especially women or to be more precise, women of the 21st century. It is a matter of discussion whether the influence it has exercised can be categorised as positive or negative. But for sure, the transformation with respect to the gender roles in society is notable. Women of today have not only become aware of their rights but are also well informed about the ample opportunities they have in every field. They have empowered and liberated themselves from the age old taboos and shackles.

Shobha De, a journalist, short story writer and a novelist of recognition like the other inspiring female writers, has also carved a niche for herself in the area of feminist writings. She is famous for her bold style of writings. Her novels are a study in feminism and portray women with liberated mindset. She is realistic and frank in her character portrayal and is often misunderstood as being vulgar in her expressions. In a country like India, when the talks of sex and romance were considered as embarrassing, Shobha De became one of the pioneers of presentation of open expressions in matters related to women, sex and eroticism.

It will not be incorrect to state that feminism is a continuous thought which is manifest in almost all the writings of Shobha De.

*Socialite Evenings*, presents the life of the protagonist, Karuna, who revolts from the set norms and customs, held by the society in search of her identity. Though Shobha De has succeeded in the presentation of her viewpoint related to the socialite women of Bombay through the character of Karuna, but Karuna, in our opinion cannot be accepted to be an archetype of women liberation, emancipation and independence. The location of Indian woman cannot be discordant with the Indian cultural traditions and important necessary customs.

**Keywords:** Socialite, Glimmer and Glamour, Persona, Identity, Disciplinarian, Fashionable And Elite, Cobweb, Multidimensional, Feministic Shades, Modelling, Extra Marital, Smugness.

Feminism as a movement has had a tremendous impact on almost all the genres of literature. It has enveloped people at large; especially women or to be more precise, 21<sup>st</sup> century women. It is a matter of discussion whether the influence it has exercised can be categorised as positive or negative. But for sure, the transformation with respect to the gender roles in society is notable. The leading feminist writers like; George Eliot, Margaret Atwood, Naomi Woolf, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Alice Walker, Bessie Head, Maya Angelou along with the Indian women writers such as; Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherji, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, etc., have conquered the world readership by writing on pivotal feminist issues like; gender inequality or discrimination, question of identity and self, women marginalization, subjugation or subordination as well as women rebellion, emancipation, liberation and independence. They have exercised a powerful influence on the modern women as they have been able to relate themselves to the range of women characters and situations underlined in their writings.

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Shobha De, a journalist, short story writer and a novelist of recognition like the other inspiring female writers, has also carved a niche for herself in the area of feminist writings. She is famous for her bold style of writings. Her novels are a study in feminism and portray women with liberated mindset. She is realistic and frank in her character portrayal and is often misunderstood as being vulgar in her expressions. In a country like India, when the talks of sex and romance were considered as embarrassing, Shobha De became one of the pioneers of presentation of open expressions in matters related to women, sex and eroticism. Due to the display of candidness, impertinence and freeness in her writings, she has become a model for the writers, especially the women writers of India, writing in English. It will not be incorrect to state that feminism is a continuous thought which is manifest in almost all the writings of Shobha De:

Her works explore the interpersonal interaction between Indian women and their male counterparts. Her literary works transmit the idea of rising up for women's rights, which has an outcry of oppression and discrimination against women in a patriarchal culture. She has a remarkable talent for discussing delicate issues relating to interpersonal interactions in a distinctive manner. She has demonstrated a capacity to depict delicate aspects of human existence, social and sexual interactions, as well as the psyche of women with a hint of open-heartedness in her novels. (qtd. in Tharu 8)

*Socialite Evenings* happens to be the first novel by Shobha De, published in the year 1989, which delves into the life of women belonging to the fashionable and elite class who keep themselves busy in social events and socializing. The story of the novel revolves around Bombay's high society women who amidst the luxury and glamour of life find themselves

stressed, tangled and lost in the chaos of the very fast moving city and even faster changing people. By way of this novel, De has tried to expose the life of the protagonist, Karuna, who happens to be a socialite of Bombay and is caught in the cobweb of complexities which a conventional human relationship proposes as against the modern social environment. The portrayal of the other female characters in the novel like; Anjali, Ritu and Si reveal multidimensional aspects of feminism, identity and social status. They are represented as independent women in action and spirit. They strive to become economically independent out of which they can pave the path of happiness for them. An urge to not to subject themselves to the patriarchal setup make them different from the traditional women. The paper is an attempt to discover the ways in which De comments on the different feministic shades flashed in the narrative offering a nuanced portrayal of women's lives, experiences, and struggles in urban India.

Shobha De presents her view of modern India through a young woman's rebellious eyes in *Socialite Evenings*. Karuna, a middle class Indian girl, "BORN IN A DUSKY CLINIC IN SATARA, A REMOTE VILLAGE IN Maharashtra" (10). Her revolting nature is made clear in the very first chapter of the novel:

I was the only child with the discipline problem both at home and at school. In the house it manifested itself in small things –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 . . . .

At school, defiance took another form. I wanted to be different because I wasn't rich . . . I would try and attract attention by wearing my sash hipper-style, hitching the hem of my dress higher . . . . A sassy kid, small for her age, oppressed at home and hungering for things she didn't have. (16)

Karuna was dissatisfied with the life she was leading with her family and when she meets through her friend Charlie, a woman named Anjali who was looking for “models for a fashion show” (11), she is fascinated by everything about her. Thus the meeting with Anjali, “a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy” Abe at her “tiny office near Metro cinema” (11) becomes a turning point of Karuna’s life and sets the tone of the novel too. Before meeting Anjali, Karuna “saw the world mainly through the prism of Charlie” (20). It was at one of the modelling sessions (for Charlie) arranged by her Uncle (who ran an ad agency), Karuna gets noticed and when asked by Charlie’s Uncle to shoot for Mr. Chopra, one of his clients, she gave permission on the condition that the photographs won’t be printed without her permission. This was the beginning of her career as a model.

Karuna’s father was a strict disciplinarian and his reaction was of a strong dislike when he saw her daughter’s photograph in the newspaper: ““Disgraceful! Cheap! Filthy! No Brahmin girl has ever stooped so low. Tell me –how did this photograph get here?”” (26). Karuna, being defiant in nature, does not pay much heed to it and continues modelling though she “didn’t enjoy it much” (27). This leads her to meeting Anjali at the agency. Anjali and Karuna become close friends until nuptial bells strike in Karuna’s life and she leaves for the States. Anjali’s marriage was not a good one as her husband cheated on her. Karuna’s marriage did not fare well either. Karuna has married a wealthy man from the States and shedding her middle class past makes her way in a high class society, completely unaware that her upward climb will soon pave a slide to many lows. Her marriage very soon goes on rocks and she gets involved with her husband’s friend Krish. When her husband finds out about her extra marital affair and tries to control her like her father she abandons his home and steps into the world of writing to find a new enlightened self. In doing so, she rediscovers the woman who was swept away by the power, wealth and glamour of the high society.

Behind her glamorous public persona emerges a warrior – a mature woman who had to lose everything to truly acquire her womanhood.

De's protagonist, Karuna challenges the orthodoxy implicit in the Indian society and its taboos and is rebellious when it comes to the conservation of her independence. Unlike the common Indian woman who is taught to consider that sex is a necessary practice for progeny and that an Indian wife needs to submit herself to the sexual desires of her husband, Karuna is portrayed differently as a woman with independent thoughts and practices. She is more confident, dominating and self-assertive and is absolutely un-submissive. She is least afraid of the disclosure of her affairs. Since, Karuna belongs to the higher strata of the Indian society she is not concerned about the common Indian people and their society which still remains quite conservative and abides by the Indian traditions and customs. The concept of morality is outdated for the so called "page 3" women and she believes in breaking the age old Indian traditions of loyalty in marriage and splurges in a row of pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. Though, she places importance to sensuality and sex in her personal life but forgets in its glimmer of glamour that in order to affirm to life one has to abide by sensitivity and not mere sensuousness. Commenting upon such kinds of modern women, Hardeep Singh opines:

The new concept of pleasure envisages complete sexual freedom which is accompanied by economic freedom; uncontrolled passion is sought by Shobha De's women in the form of pleasure. Social rules have always been harsh on women in India. . . .

Rigorous taboos of our society forbid women to have any sort of sexual liaisons by breaking the rigid laws of matrimony in India. However women in Shobha De's novels are broad minded enough to continue with their flings and affairs without

bothering about the matrimonial alliance of their partners. These women are confident and are reasonable enough to justify their relationship. (28)

Karuna is not prepared to obey the dictates of male chauvinism abundantly present in the Indian society and the orthodox social rules and customs made therewith. She is a daring and bold woman who does not hitch to seek pleasure outside her marriage to overcome boredom and mental fatigue. She revolts against the Indian social norms of placing woman as sexually inactive. Rather, she states her independent norms by placing herself as an active partner in sex encounters. She finds sexual relationship with her husband as taxing: "I've stopped bothering to move under him or to even to wrap my legs dutifully around his waist as I once used too (44). Karuna's disappointing relationship with her husband nourished her fantasy of a liberated woman. The drastic and bold endeavours initiated by the elite women of the upper society within the patriarchal setup thrilled and attracted her. She says, "Women it seemed for the first time could have control over their lives. The scene was changing even in Bombay. Women work, women married, women divorced and women remained single" (65).

The emotional conflicts between Karuna and her husband, before taking up the decision to remain single, affirms the mutual expectations of a man and a woman from each other. The little patch of independence after divorce gave Karuna the freedom of action. To her mother's insistence on getting married to the right one for a secured life, she replied that she was at peace with herself minding her business. Her acceptance of her smugness ended up her conversation with her mother thus:

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 interest. But I am not sure I'll make a good wife to him. Or he is a good husband to me. Perhaps we are both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any sacrifices – not now. (176)

Her heart and mind are fearful of stepping into a new relationship after the past callousness with her husband. Even her love for Girish is unable to prepare her for a new commitment.

The married life of Karuna categorically presents the internal conflicts and suffering an Indian woman faces in her married life due to the domineering and assertive attitude of her male counterpart. This leads to the question of identity crises in her. Karuna's married life is an exemplification of such an instance. For her husband, she was just a puppet who should dance at his tunes. But Karuna was not ready for such subjugation and this situation eventually resulted in her divorce.

Karuna's friend Anjali too suffers identically due to incompatibility with her husband and his dominating behaviour. Through both Karuna and Anjali, Shobha De succeeds in discovering before the readers the marginalization and subjugation of Indian women, a practice, still prevalent in the Indian society. Shobha's assault does not target any individual but confers an attack against a system which promotes the suppression and cornering of women who otherwise are no less than men in any area of activity whatsoever. *Socialite Evenings* very explicitly brings forth the instance of marital disharmony wherein the expectations of modern educated Indian women are painted in all its colours. Isha Sharma and Priyanka Chanda's statement is worth noticing here:

Being feminist De's novels raise a strong protest against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom to act and live according to their will. . . .

However in this fast changing world, the role of women in the society too, has been changing fast, affecting greatly the sexual mores and social norms prevalent in the society. Shobha De reacts against the male culture and strongly detests the marginalization of women . . . she is the first to explore the world of urban women of higher social strata. In urban area male hegemony is no longer acceptable as women

have started thinking for themselves. A closer study of her novels reveals her protest against the image of woman as an auxiliary.

The analysis of the novel brings to light that *Socialite Evenings* by De is a saga in feminism targeting the “New woman” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus having a tremendous mass appeal. Women can seek happiness and pleasure independently even without a man’s company. There are other alternative areas where a woman can find satisfaction in life without the presence of man. What is important in such a situation is that a woman needs to be financially and socially independent. Karuna in the *Socialite Evenings* eventually finds pleasure and satisfaction in writing and the attainment of success in this area leads her to happiness and contentment and a new identity. Prema, and Malathy P. are of the opinion that:

In *Socialite Evenings*, the women characters are unable to understand the significance of marriage and move their attention from one man to another which results in breaking down of the families and the marriages. The institution of marriage gets new meaning in the books of Shobha De. A woman in Indian society marries not just the man and subsequently loses her identity in marriage and relinquishes her freedom and sets about pleasing everybody. But the new generation of women with their new found release from matrimonial bondage adopts different perspectives and revolt against the old order. It tells us that women have the rights to enjoy the sexual freedom with no bondage of marital relationships. (3)

Though Shobha De has succeeded in the presentation of her viewpoint related to the socialite women of Bombay now named Mumbai, but the protagonist, Karuna, in our opinion cannot be accepted to be an archetype of women liberation, emancipation and independence. The location of Indian woman cannot be discordant with the Indian cultural traditions and important necessary customs. All Indian customs cannot be studied as orthodoxal. The

importance of some social customs can be realised by the fact that they have received legitimate and legal sanctions under the rule of Indian law. Marriage is one such sacred custom which has its own sanctity despite its various weaknesses and disagreements. A woman can become economically and socially independent living with her spouse. Pleasure alone cannot be the object or the end of life. As a social animal the woman too has her own responsibilities and role to play for the progeny.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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