

**MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY AND DIVORCE: REDEFINING MARITAL MORALITY
AND WOMANHOOD IN SHOBHA DE'S *SOCIALITE EVENINGS***

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Abstract

Shobha De, a notable Indian woman writer in English, has freely depicted in her novels a new image of women along with their changing moral perceptions. De's new women are educated, self-dependent, possessive, daring, ambitious and aspiring for fulfilling their dreams and longings, thus achieving freedom and self-assertion. Their desire for decoded individual identity and seeking self-fulfillment makes them revolt against the patriarchal established norms and aesthetics of morality and social codes, definitely in question of identity crisis and thus redefining the concept of womanhood and marriage and 'marital fidelity'. The protagonist Karuna and other women characters in De's "Socialite Evenings" (1989) represent such ambitious, possessive, aspiring and sexually liberated new women who violate the traditional notion of marriage, female sexuality and morality in their journey to self-fulfillment and self-actualization. This present paper aims at exploring De's representation of the changed perception of woman about marriage, sex life, and marital morality through the changing sensibilities of women characters as depicted in De's "Socialite Evenings".

Keywords: marriage, sexuality, morality, extra-marital relationship, divorce, daring, new women.

Introduction

Shobha De (b.1948) is a notable woman writer in the post-Independence Indian literature in English. She as a novelist shares the contemporary literary arena along with her sister-writers such as NayantaraSahgal, Anita Desai, ShashiDeshpande, ManjuKapur from the perspectives of women, 'the second sex'. A staunch supporter and an ardent follower of feminism, she writes boldly about the issues of her own sex, pointing out to the multi-layered problems and troubles of modern day educated women from Indian contexts. De confesses: "I did write with a great deal of empathy toward women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation" (qtd. in Dodiya, 14). She talks about the frank and candid tales of human relationships, particularly man-woman relationships and the old and new value patterns. She has freely depicted in her novels a new image of women along with the changing moral perceptions reaching new heights in the rich and educated Indian society. C.P. Surendran, a poet and journalist rightly says that De "has completely changed the idea of literature by increasing interest in English pulp fiction" (qtd. in *Asia Week*, n.p.). Unlike other women novelists who have always shown a conscious restraint in exploring the physical side of marital relationships, De evinces a daredevil courage in writing about sex and morality as asserted and practiced by her 'new woman' in the changing social conditions. De's forthright treatment of sex, social taboos and relationships through her modern rebellious women figures brings for her novels a 'pornographic pejoration'. S.K. Navin says: "ShobhaDe's novels are entertainments rather than novels proper, expressing sagas of bed-hopping, chronicles of high society and low ethicality, drawing room manners and barn door morals" (159). But her novels open up a new vista to explore the world of women, their desire and ideology in the changing social context.

De's new women

De's woman-centered novels portray a world of ambitious, assertive and strong-willed new woman. A 'new woman' in her novels represents an educated, self-conscious, and economically and sexually liberated daring woman always in search of self-identity, freedom and emancipation in every walk of life, reshaping the stereotyped image of Indian woman. Her new woman is possessive, daring, and aspiring for fulfilling her dreams

achieving liberty and dignity. De remarks in *Asia Week*: “The women in my books are definitely not door mats. They are not willing to be kicked around” (n.p.). The desire for decoded individual identity and seeking for self-fulfillment makes her woman revolt against the established norms and aesthetics of morality and social codes, definitely in question of identity crisis and gender discrimination. For achieving her target in the gendered society she does not hesitate to smash the long accepted moral notions relating to marriage, feminine sexuality and familial norms. She even manipulates her body as an important means to promote her ends caring little to the conventional socio-ethical code and conduct. This new woman is ‘highly individualistic, calculative and self-centered’ whom the fundamentalists and moralists consider to be ‘loose-character’. The new woman nurturing different attitude and ideology creates ‘a new kind of morality that appears sometimes astonishing and incredible’ (Ningthoujam 8) thus reshaping the conventional notion of moral values and ethical norms. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, ‘morals are concerned with principles of right and wrong behaviour’. Morality includes ‘a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular group, creed or culture (Wikipedia). Morality in a way is the sum total of beliefs and values of people at a particular time. In fact, ‘Morality’ emphasizes norms and values which are derived from the actions of people in the changing social atmosphere. Morality thus becomes a term with a changeable meaning which can be redefined from time to time. Like the climatic change, moral set up of a particular society may shift but slowly in its own necessity or way. NayantaraSahgal speaks that the moral order is subject to change, not degenerating through Mira in *This Time of Morning*: “It (morality) had to be refashioned and protected in every age, and every generation found its own way to do this” (161). De’s new woman believing in different perception of marriage, relationships and morality are represented by Maya, (*Second Thoughts*, 1996), Asha Rani (*Starry Nights*, 1990), Alisha and Mikki (*Sisters*, 1992) and Amrita (*Strange Obsession*, 1992) who straightforwardly flout the socio-ethical parameters and boundaries associated with marriage and female sexuality for personal space and dignity. They never compromise with their space, desires and sexual urges for the sake of social conventions. They hardly consider pre-marital sex or extra-marital relation to be a taboo; rather they indulge in ‘unabashed’ pursuit of sex. They explicitly declare and discuss

the need for sex in their lives. Swati representing De's new woman, in *Snapshots* (1995) views sex not as "filthy" (164). Even divorce is no more a death words for them. Shobha De explains the change in women's attitude towards marriage: "The terms underlying marriage have . . . been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. . . . Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go" (*Shooting from the Hip* 111-13). The changed viewpoint and beliefs of these new women have reshaped the conventional notion of marriage, morality and womanhood seriously 'disturbing'/redefining the very pattern of man-woman relationship.

Objective

In the present paper, I intend to explore ShobhaDe's representation of new perception of marriage, sexuality and marital morality reshaped by women with reference to De's depiction of her women in *Socialite Evenings*.

De's New Women in *Socialite Evenings*

De's maiden novel, *Socialite Evenings* (1989) exhibits the changing outlook of the modern educated Indian women through the protagonist, Karuna. She hails from a conservative middle class family and plunges in the circle of Mumbai high society after her bureaucrat father's posting in this glittering city. She leaves her middle class values and moral standards and embraces the high life of rich upper class. She gives an expression to this feeling in: "I was terrible self-conscious and awkward and resented with all my being my middle class origins" (10). This dissatisfaction guides her to decide to be a socialite. Becoming wildly ambitious Karuna defies her father's strict conservative rules and jumps into the glamour world of modeling. She violates the age-old moral ethos of her middle class family by neglecting the grave objections from her father regarding her profession of modeling when he comes to know about her photos in a magazine: "When did you do this? How dare you? Do you mean to disgrace us completely? This is not something girls from respectable families do. How did this photograph get here?" (14)

Karuna's meeting with Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy, Abbas Tyabji, makes Karuna's entry into the glitzy fashionable world easier. Anjali becomes her mentor in Mumbai. The eagerness of an educated middle class ambitious woman to be a

part of the high society is clearly seen in the character of Karuna. She is proud of being acquainted with Anjali. Anjali's display of her riches fascinates Karuna beyond measure: "Her fragrance washed over me. ... Then there it was, an enormous, finned Impala in silver gray. It glided up like a gigantic Swan negotiating its way past handcart pullers, pedestrians, taxis and local buses. It was the perfect vehicle for her" (4).

Karuna enjoys belonging to high society at Anjali's initiation. She grows so self-conscious that in course of time she becomes almost a rival to Anjali. Karuna becomes over caring for her career and dreams to realize. She becomes so manipulative to fulfill her desire even at the cost of her beauty and body. This happens when Karuna starts dating the New Delhi based filmmaker in London for material prosperity. The changing moral vision of her character is once again disclosed when she decides to marry him for money and high life style, instead of Bunty, her poor lover, little considering her incompatibility with her husband as well as her middle class moral sentiments. The middle class moral sensibility regarding marriage as a heavenly bondage does not find a place in her heart. Even she does not take parental permission and consent before marriage. She considers marriage a game for security and money. Her marriage with "He" is only to ensure her position into the high social circle of Mumbai. As she says: "May be I accepted the marriage, sans passion, sans anything, because it suited me. I didn't have to excerpt myself. I didn't have to prove anything..." (44). Consequently, her marital dreams are tarnished when her husband turns out to be a cold, indifferent partner. Her husband is not at all bothered about her sentiments and desires. He is busy with his own rise in business in the corporate world. Later, she understands her mistake in choosing her husband because the man turns out to be just an average Indian, 'unexciting and uninspiring' (65). The husband-wife relationship devoid of love and passion results in the unavoidable life of unhappiness. She confesses that she had married "the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time" (65).

Karuna's attitude to marriage and husband-wife relationship marks different. Though she seeks for material comfort in life, she is not pleased merely with it. She also wants personal freedom and sexual gratification which she does not want to compromise with anything. PromilaKapur, a renowned sociologist, argues that women now aspire for "natural companionship, respect, material comforts, satisfaction of emotional and physical needs, in

marriage” (220). Traditionally, marriage means adjustment with the situation. Her mother advises her about married life on the eve of her wedding that: “Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It’s just something to get used to.” (68) Contrary to her mother’s view, she considers marriage troublesome for women: “We treated marriage like a skin allergy– an irritant all right” (68). To her a perfect marriage is “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, enjoying the same things” (68). But locked up in a fragile and futile marriage, Karuna’s conjugal life suffers from emotional incompatibility. This also affects her sexual life which largely depends on good spousal communication which is the ‘basis of good sex.’ According to Shobha De, “Sex, in a good marriage, is not about taking, but giving. It’s not about performance, it’s about mutual pleasure.... Sexual compatibility is achieved over a period of time, and only through trust and caring” (*Spouse* 155-57). Deficiency in these emotional sensibilities Karuna feels imprisoned in her conjugal life.

This marital frigidity and mal-adjustment leads her to the search for the alternative way of life – a new life partner, little thinking about the marital moral compulsion. Impelled by her desire for luxury and excitement, she is involved in a post-marital affair with her husband’s friend, Krish. Karuna’s situation recalls of Maya who suffers an unfulfilled sexual relationship with Ranjan in De’s *Second Thoughts*. Being dissatisfied she is entangled into a post-marital knot with her college-fellow neighbor, Nikhil. The moral bindings cannot control her from being surrendered to Nikhil for sexual gratification. Like Maya, Karuna gets back what she missed or lacked in her husband in her new relationship with Krish. She finds new hope in Krish. Her extra-marital liaison is “actually a psychological need to escape the claustrophobic effects of her marriage” (Samanta 77). The way she upturns the ethical conventionality of marriage brings out her non-conformist mindset. Traditionally, marital infidelity and also outing with a person other than her husband for sexual pleasure are taken as moral decline in the conservative Indian society where since the days of Rgveda, ‘the marriage tie is hailed with reverence and mutual conjugal fidelity is emphasized’. This tradition also finds expression even in the *Manusamhita*(IX 101-2):“Let mutual fidelity continue until death. This may be considered as the highest law for husband

and wife” (Kapadia 97). Karuna easily violates this “mutual fidelity” which has no meaning for her. A new breed of woman, she inculcates a new set of moral view where personal happiness is dearer than conventions and chastity. In order to satisfy her thirsty heart, she cheats her husband and unlike her traditional counterparts, she plans unhesitatingly for an outing with her lover, Krish: “While he was innocently instructing me, I was already planning, when and how I’d meet Krish. At the Airport? Hotel? What we’d do together – how liberated and free we’d feel without any pressure on us” (128). Traditionally, this is unthinkable step to any conventional Indian wife from a conservative middle class family. Karuna, in spite of knowing the fact that having a secret relationship before and after marriage is taken as moral collapse, remains indifferent to this and very outspoken in their moral attitude. She does not find anything wrong in post marital affair. So instead of keeping it a secret, she is frank about it. She tells outright her husband: “There’s no points in post mortems. I don’t believe in them. Let’s go on with the story. I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him—in Venice....Treat this as a short term mania that will wear itself out and then we can go back to business as usual” (186). Her outspoken confession about her sexual drives turns down the conventional feminine decency of sexual morality. Karuna, like Anjali, adores sex as celebration and easily shatters the institutionalized pattern of female sexuality. Like Swati in De’s *Snapshots*, she hardly thinks “sexuality” as “dirty” word and is hardly serious about conventional “ideas of purity, morality, chastity” (165).

However, the interesting point is that even her extra marital affair does not provide her mental peace. She is shocked when three years romantic affair with Krish ends with bitterness, realizing that their relation was a mere sex game. Disillusioned Karuna is compelled to take up odd jobs but later with the help of Anjali she finds a lucrative job- a freelance Ad writer, which helps her to support her crazy life style and she finds herself free. Financially self-dependent, she does not care about her husband whom she detests and rejects outright. Karuna, instead of being subservient to her husband, declares her indignation to her husband and makes him responsible for her despair:

You really make me sick.....I don’t love you –never have. As for you- I really don’t know to this day why you choose to marry me. ... I’m tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerisms, the way take me for granted and expect me to fall into your

overall scheme of things. I really don't care one way or the other if I ever see you again. So just get off my back. (184)

Even she does not hesitate in giving divorce her husband. A new woman, she considers marriage no more a lifelong bonds with the husband. She takes it easily as a part of life. She tells Ritu: "Divorce is not a dirty word anymore. I'm sure my mother-in-law would feel pretty relieved, may be my husband too" (213). Karuna, like Shobha De, thinks that it is meaningless to continue the loveless conflicting marriage relationship, and in that case, mutual separation or divorce is the best solution. She finally breaks loose of "the holy bonds of matrimony" (305). Divorce is not an easy thing to a traditional woman in the Indian 'conservative' society which "advices brides to go to any length to 'save' a marriage" (De, *Spouse* 74). In that sense, her decision is an unpredictable 'daring' step for an Indian woman, at least for the Indian social milieu in the early 1980s. Liberated from marital obligations, she takes care of her parents and feels herself satisfied and confident. So instead of 'getting into a second marriage' she says: "Single is good for me" (200). She thinks marriage entails a loss of her individuality. Hence, she prefers her single-woman status which affirms her self-identity as well as her deviation from the marital tradition.

The traditional moral values and code of conduct are upturned by De's "ultramodern" "characterless" women in most of her novels. In the present novel, apart from Karuna, the character of Anjali commits the similar 'moral lapse', if viewed from conventional ethical perspectives. Like Karuna, Anjali also marries Abe for luxury and gold. She even willingly procures young virgins for Abe's sexual satisfaction. Opposed to the typical Indian wife, she is not jealous at all when Abe makes affair with new girls. Like her husband, Anjali gets involved in licentious relationships thinking little of social moral demand. Anjali has several involvements with her male friends. She makes wild sexual adventures - first with Belgian photographer who has come to photograph Karuna's modeling postures, then with the young boy Karan who is approximately her daughter's age. Anjali enjoys her 'illicit' love affairs and pronounces "this is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me. This is the experience I have been waiting for." (96) After her divorce from Abe, she once again looks for new companion who can fill her husband's place and she is interested to his property to keep up her luxurious life style. Anjali gets her desired mate once again in the filthy rich

Kumar Bhandari who is a gay and who has his own crazy style of passionate sessions with young boy Murty. Anjali marries Kumar for the wrong reasons. Finding no satisfaction in marriage she opts for a divorce. Unlike the traditional girls, she as a divorcee along with Karuna feels the same way:

We treated marriage like a skin game –an irritant all right, but not something that would incapacitate us. We had our own secret lives –and by that I do not mean clandestine affairs. But these are our private worlds, inaccessible to the men we had married” (46).

She gets ‘thrilled’ to “spend hours in this world ...while being lost in a universe created by me, for myself” (46). The sex maniac Anjali ultimately becomes sexless woman. She leaves Kumar alone with his own fantasies and in return gets the financial security and enjoys luxuries without which she cannot live. The interesting point is that she changes tremendously but it was too late. Her so-called ‘moral degeneration’ casts a deep impact on her daughter Mimi, a drug addict. Anjali’s passion for unconventional and materialistic life style makes her forget her responsibility as a mother. In this connection L. Sonia Ningthoujam says: “She may have changed her attitude towards life but her previous wild deeds take their toll on her young daughter Mimi who becomes a drug addict. Anjali fails in her role as a mother. Obsessed with her own happiness and comfort, she completely neglects her daughter” (80).

Apart from Karuna and Anjali who unconventionally succumb to open ‘immoral’ love-adventures, we find another character named Ritu who behaves similarly. Her marriage fails because of her indulgence in promiscuous affairs. She is unhappy in her married life and she is interested for Gul, an underworld Don and a smuggler who has enormous wealth. Her love relationship turns her into a mere pimp whose duty is to procure women for Gul and his friends. In her utter frustration she starts drinking heavily and consumes drugs. The wild adventures of these women clearly reflect their tendency to break the societal shackles of marriage and marital morality in their way to redefine their roles and identities.

Thus it is clear from the reading of the characteristic features of the women characters depicted in the novel that De’s women are unconventional in their life style and way of moral thinking, especially towards the sanctity of marriage institution as well as marital

fidelity in the conjugal relationships. They ignore the traditional feminine image and create a new set of moral values within their glittering aristocratic world. Their moral sense may be questionable in the eyes of people belonging to the common or middle/lower strata of society but in their own aristocratic circle what they do seems to be normal form of womanly behaviour. They bear no interference in their personal lives. Each one of them - from Karuna to Ritu seems to have a similar sense of marital morality. None of them is eager to maintain the marriage and the so-called inviolability of the traditional husband wife relationships. Whenever dissatisfied they seek gratification in post-marital affair, and they decide for breakup of marital life, and if required, they choose the path of mutual divorce. In fact, what they do is absolutely justified and they don't find anything wrong in their preoccupation with sex, money, extra-marital infidelity. The striking aspect of the new women is that they do not make morality a big issue. Even they do not hesitate to discuss the inhibited subjects like sex, which is traditionally considered as taboo. In the backdrop of this value pattern De sets her novels and *Socialite Evenings* too, like De's each novel, presents a captivating image of the actual lives of that attractive high society women with all their new sensibilities. Their promiscuous sexual behaviour and free life style may bring the bad name of being women of loose morals. But if we compare them to their male counterparts in the question of moral values, (Abe, Krish, Kumar all suffer from traditional moral lapse) it will be wrong to call them 'characterless'. Their moral behaviour is thus what suits them and their new way of life.

Conclusion

The close reading of the novel brings out the new image of women, especially Karuna. Anjali, Mimi, and Ritu equally violate the marital moral boundary, but in respect of personal choice and identity construction Karuna differs from others. In the process Karuna, unlike her fellow women, gradually resents, resists and rejects the male cultural sexist identity of woman. Karuna represents De's emancipated educated urban elite woman who seeks socio-economic liberty and an equal right with male. She articulates without scruple her desires and preferences, and denies playing the feminine role of passivity. Rather, she, unlike her fellow women in the novel is possessive, initiative and committed to realize her dreams. Whenever goes unfulfilled, she rebels and emerges a non-conformist. To conclude, a new concept of

marriage, female sexuality and marital relationships has been framed in this novel of De. Thus De's *Socialite Evenings* can be considered as a novel calling for redefining of the traditional set of moral ideology regarding marriage, female sexuality and marital fidelity in the light of actions of fast growing breed of ambitious new women.

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