

VISUALISING GENDER: A STUDY OF SHOBHAA DE'S NOVEL *SECOND THOUGHTS*

Tanima Kumari  
 Research Scholar  
 Department of HSS  
 ISM, Dhanbad  
[tani1805@gmail.com](mailto:tani1805@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Being a famous Indian columnist and novelist, Shobhaa De has authored over dozens of novels especially addressing different issues on women. The paper endeavours to study one such work of Shobhaa De namely Second Thoughts which deals with the different facets of Maya's life. According to the patriarchal notion, the male 'fathers' their text as the God governs his empire. In the same way, Maya's husband Ranjan has tried to 'father' her liberty, her happiness. Born in the middle-class family in Calcutta, Maya was eager to get away from her boredom and move to the glamorous city, Mumbai which happened after her arranged marriage. She shifted with her husband, Ranjan to Mumbai. The paper attempts to study Maya's role as the ideal wife and how she is being objectified by her husband. She has been curbed and trapped in the rich cage of her husband's house which pays no heed to her desires. It would deal with the notion of ideal 'bahu' which is being enforced on Maya making her object of the husband's demands. Sometimes, Maya has no voice of her own as Gayatri Spivak says in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' that how the subaltern is denied of voice and requires a medium to speak for her which is affirmative providing protection to her. The situation of Maya, somewhere relates with that of Charlotte Bronte's character Jane Eyre. Further, it raises the feminist questions to properly understand how 'woman' is strong and persistent, even more than males.*

**Key-Words:** Feminism, Woman as 'Other', Identity, Subjectivity

## INTRODUCTION

Shobhaa De is an eminent writer whose writing style is 'signature, fierce and individualistic and is not restricted to the bounds of literary decorum and norms.' As a writer, Shobhaa De has been endowed with creative abilities to represent the feminine sensibility and delicate aspects of human life. She brings out the typical conditions of a woman's life and tactfully deals with their issues. Her novels such as *Starry Nights*, *Socialite Evening*, *Strange Obsessions*, *Second Thoughts* and other works focus on woman's vicissitudes and show them in a new light. Basically, the author deals with the upper middle-class women of urban India. The author projects woman in various paradigms through her writing. The novel *Second Thoughts* revolves around the themes of marriage, quest for identity, family, relationships, patriarchy and struggle to survive. Maya, the protagonist is a simple girl who desires to lead a happy family life. Maya occupies a central place in the novel *Second Thoughts* with all her virtues and vices. Eager to fly away from the monotonous, boring middle-class home in Calcutta, Maya comes to Mumbai after marriage. Young and pretty, Maya is married to a handsome, ambitious man, Ranjan who has completed his education from an American University. Initially, Maya was delighted as she moved to Mumbai. Fascinated by the glamorous life of Mumbai, Maya dreamt to cherish the new life at her in-laws but eventually she felt of being trapped in the suburbs of Mumbai. Her husband had a rich family background. Maya tries to become an idealistic wife but spending time with him, she realized that he does not even care for her sentiments and

emotions. His views are very conservative and he did not allow any kind of liberty to Maya. She finds herself shackled in her wedding knot and experienced utter loneliness in the crowded city.

The story begins with Maya's arrival in Mumbai after marriage with her mother. The very first impression of Mumbai sensed by Maya was true as when she alighted from her compartment in Mumbai, she said:

‘Bombay smelt. Well, so did Calcutta, but it was a different smell. Besides, she was used to that particular stench. Bombay smelt of desperation and deceit. Or maybe that was what rotting fish did to the fumes that seemed to cling permanently to the city. Maya tweaked her nostrils and took a deep breath---- just to make sure. Maybe she had made a mistake about the stench. Maybe it wasn't Bombay that exuded it but just this dirty, overcrowded platform.’(*Second Thoughts*, p.2)

These lines itself indicate that Maya had at least construed that Mumbai has ‘different smell’ than that of Calcutta, different smell of ‘desperation and deceit.’ Even in the platform, Maya looked down to see a dead body lying over there. To her surprise, there was no one to notice the corpse, the collies deftly crossed the body without caring to observe the dead man. The corpse looked alive with his staring eyes projected towards the pigeons above drawing perceptions of the people residing in Mumbai. Everybody is indifferent and insensitive towards each other. Later, as one proceeds, it is seen that Maya, too, has been pinned down to a place where she finds no freedom for herself.

Maya's mother was always cautions of her daughter's colour and suggested her to wear yellow colour saree as it made Maya look fairer. Even before Maya's marriage to Ranjan, her mother has constantly taken care of Maya's looks and especially her skin colour. Maya asserted that she is not colour-conscious but the very next moment she uttered the pros and cons of colour.

As she explained time and again, ‘It's not as if I'm colour- conscious or anything. But it's true that fair skin denotes prosperity. Class. Upbringing. Background. Position. A dark person rarely looks wealthy. Well- fed. Happy. To be born dark is to be condemned for life!’

Maya comments that ‘to be born dark is to be condemned for life’ implying the difficulties which a black woman faces throughout her life. During the slavery period in USA, black people were not acknowledged as humans just because they were black. So, in that case, black women were triply oppressed i.e., by race, gender and class. Maria Stewart, one of the leading Black feminists questions, ‘Shall it any longer said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force?’

It is undeniably true of Maya's trying to become a loyal and ideal wife. When Maya proposed to her husband about the idea of doing job in Mumbai as she holds a degree in textile designing, Ranjan sprightly dismisses her spirit saying, ‘A job? In Bombay? Maya, you don't know what you're talking about. Bombay is not Calcutta... You have to be good... great... brilliant... to get a job here. People don't waste time on nobodies.’ Maya is dishearten by his words and meekly utters in low voice, ‘...I'm quite good at what I do. At least that's what they used to tell me in Calcutta.’ Ranjan wanted Maya to confine herself in the four walls of the house. When she complained of being lonely in the house, Ranjan angrily left his food and starting scolding her badly. Maya's mother explains her the basic principle of happy marriage is sacrifice, and all the sacrifices must be undertaken by the woman. Ranjan is indifferent to her emotions and often behaved rudely with her. GayatriSpivak says in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ that how the subaltern is denied of voice and requires a medium to speak for her which is affirmative providing protection to her. The situation of Maya, somewhere relates with that of Charlotte Bronte's character Jane Eyre. There is no space provided to woman to bloom and male tries to ‘father’ their life. Even in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge*,

*Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins says, 'According to the cult of true womanhood that traditional family ideal, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.'

Once Maya bought Ranjan a present but the moment he saw it, he was furious on her. He started shouting on her saying that everything 'costs money' and she is not to waste it like that. Even, Ranjan asserted firmly that in future Maya needs to ask him whenever she purchases anything. At this point of time, Maya felt that she is not wanted at all. Neither her parents wants her nor her husband. Simone de Beauvoir aptly says in *The Second Sex* that after marriage, women '...remain unwanted, they are, socially viewed, so much wastage.'

Ranjan treats Maya as an 'object' to meet up his needs. Once, when Ranjan tries to come close to her but at the very next moment, he retaliates saying that he is not ready for this. Maya is taken aback by his behaviour and feels that even she was not ready but for his happiness, she decided to proceed but Ranjan pushed her back. bell hooks asserts, 'As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities.... As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others....'

Dissatisfied Maya, starts thinking of her old college days and remembers Nikhil, a young college-going neighbour. Eventually, as the story proceeds, one finds that Maya falls in love with Nikhil the lines very evidently projects her feelings.

'Nikhil's shadowy figure leaping on and off his battered bike continued to dominate my thoughts. As I replayed those hours on Malabar Hill over and over again, fleeting little incidents would enter my thoughts. Every encounter we'd ever had. I recalled how he'd turned up once unexpectedly as always, waving *The Afternoon* in my face.'

Nikhil cares for her sentiments and supports her in decisions. She decides to leave her husband and settle with Nikhil. But later in the story, one finds that Nikhil's mother Pushpa bringing sweets in Maya's house for his son's marriage. Nikhil, too, betrays her by agreeing to marry Anshu, daughter of Pushpa's old friend. Hearing the news of Nikhil's marriage, Maya stood 'motionless' and 'unthinking' till Ranjan shouted that the chicken soup is burning in the kitchen. Ranjan remarks, 'You women! Always gossiping and wasting time.' Maya feels herself being betrayed by Nikhil and constrained in the chains of marriage. Simone de Beauvoir opines in *The Second Sex* that woman remains 'unwanted' or in simple terms 'wastage' in the society:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women, as we have seen, have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality. A man is socially an independent and complete individual; he is regarded first of all as a producer whose existence is justified by the work he does for the group....

Deceived by Nikhil, Maya feels low and tries to stable herself. Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* projects the notion of 'universal patriarchy' which is widely been criticised in recent times for 'its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists.' Entering the kitchen, she finds the chicken- soup a mess. Even, the gas range had all the sticky soup over it. She sees the spilled liquid on the floor symbolizing her own spilled fate and breaks down. Trying to steady herself, she leans against the refrigerator. She says, 'I knew I would have to make it again from scratch' suggesting her own entangled married life which she needs to weave

again. As explained by her mother, woman is the one who have to 'sacrifice' everything to churn the wheel of marriage. Maya's desperation is clearly casted by the final statement, 'I had all the time in the world now' delineating Maya's whole lifetime which she is devote to this fruitless marriage as the husbands are the 'fathers' of their wives' fates and lives.

### CONCLUSION

Maya is a woman of substance having high spirit and has quest for identity. She is driven to act according to the social demands and tries to discover them but is left isolated in the midst of people. Bombay itself portrays the image of deceit which later, Maya faces in her personal life, too. Shobhaa De attempts to achieve the 'feminine identity' in the society and provides her women characters the wings to fly in the modern world. The author aims at challenging the age- old tradition and explores a new social order in the society. *Second Thoughts* is thus regarded as one of the most admired work of Shobhaa De which presents a tragic life story of a pretty girl named Maya who dreams to become a proper 'bahu' and her upheavals in life leaves her empty- handed. Just because she is a girl, Maya is destined to lead the life in loneliness. Being a female, does not she deserve to live happily? She is tied in the knots of patriarchy and Shobhaa De, very wonderfully brings this out through various episodes. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir aptly says 'The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness---- there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness---- but that it mutilates her ; dooms her to repetition and routine.'

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