

SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS EXPOSE THE WOMEN MORAL AND SPIRITUAL BREAKDOWN OF MODERN SOCIETY'S MARRIAGE SYSTEM

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Abstract:- This paper reveals that Marriage in biological sense is a sexual relationship entered into the intention of making it permanent, even apart from whether or not it has received sanction of law or the church, marriage is essential to the well-being of human society. In India marriage is viewed as one of the Sanskaras (sacraments) which is a lifelong commitment of wife and husband. According to Hinduism marriage is a union between a male and a female with commitment so that they can pursue Dharma, Artha Kama and Moksha together. It is a gateway to earthly life of pleasure, progress prospecting and nurture of future generation and therefore influences the Social and Cultural growth of Society.

Key words: Matrimony, Suffering, Quest, Selfhood.

Introduction: The Institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of people. In the life of woman, it marks a point of maturing, it signifies the flowering of life. The ideal however now got differed with time and it is being dominated by ulterior consideration. The Institution of marriage has provided for the Society's need for love, security and family. But in the modern time, marriage has come under tremendous strain in the rich stratum of the Indian Society. On account of various factors such as promiscuity, women's growing economic independence, increased rate of divorce, luxurious life, self-centered and self-absorbed life, the Institution is on the verge of breaking up. Today's marriage is no longer supposed to be made in heaven.

Shobha De's Novels expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society's marriage system and marital relations leading to frustration, conflict and loneliness.

The present paper focuses on agony of Maya who feels trapped in matrimony. Maya neglected and criticized by her husband and exploited and deceived by her lover remains a Silent Sufferer". The present paper discusses the psychic cum social complexities of middle class Society.

Marriage is a fate traditionally sanctioned to women by Society. But marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman".

Simon De Beauvoir

Shoba De's Novels expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society's marriage system and marital relations. Shobha De has dealt with the valueless moral less world of high society. In this novel she selects the middle class society and the mute suffering of so many married women.

As a writer, she is gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss the sensitive aspects of human life and human relationship tactfully. The power of her narration is just wonderful. She is totally different from other Indian women novelists in English. She is gifted with intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. Her novels expose the hollowness of marital relations in elite class. Her novels contain frank description of sex life. For that she is criticized as "Vatsyayani" "Soft porn queen" "Pasha of pulp" "Vamp Feminist", etc. and has never been considered as a serious writer. But a serious reading of her novels shows that she is a sensitive and serious writer. She is an author who dared to unearth those issues of man-woman relationship which were never put to public by any woman writer. From Socialite Evenings to Second Thoughts, Shobha De discusses the problems of women in patriarchal society, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship and the emergence of live-in-relationship. Through her novels, she makes her readers to introspect about fast fading love, pleasure and satisfaction in marital relations. In all the earlier novels she dealt with the valueless, moral less world of high society. In Second Thoughts she selects the middle class society and the suffering of so many married women due to traditional arrange marriage system.

Second Thoughts (1996) is the seventh novel of Shobha De. It describes the agony of Maya, who feels trapped in matrimony. Jaydipsinh Dodiya comments that the theme of novel focuses on "the hollowness of Indian marriage". De explores the female psyche against male ego, the dutiful wife, the overbearing mother-in-law, the social pretence and public facades in Second Thoughts.

Here Shobha De attempts women as central figure and seems to succeed in presenting the predicament of urban modern women with extraordinary abilities and more effectively she portrays the contemporary realities of urban women novelist. One of the most structured patterns of Indian society is the role assigned to man and woman. Woman is the follower, man the leader, woman is the sufferer and man is the ordainer. The soft and cozy shell of matrimony which most Indian woman snugly fit can break any day and leave the couple exposed to horror and trauma. Maya leaves her parents' home and enters into her husband's home in Bombay but very soon she realizes the fruit of the decision. She wanted to be loved and happy but she is not loved by the man she loves. The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She resents the role of the daughter and looks forward to role of wife with the hope the new role will help

her freedom. But she experiences disillusionment in sex and suffers a silent humiliation she challenges the traditional concept of Indian wife. The mental harassment and the torture is passionately delineated truthfully in all its minute details by Shobha De.

Through her novels De has tried to shatter patriarchal hegemony. Any sensible analysis of her literary works from feminist point of view will do well to bear this fact in mind. It's this factor that lends authenticity to Shobha De', though her fictional world has aroused curiosity and interest on one hand and denunciation on the other.

This novel presents a picture of the institutions of family & marriage obtaining in the wealthy classes of the Indian society. The portrayal is authentic being an inside story because the narrator (The writer) belongs to the rich set, which is the focus of attention in the novel. In the fictional cosmos of the book, the family is crumbling and a marriage comes to be redefined. Alka Saxena extends her opinion as, "Novel is a realistic representation of the psyche the traditional Indian men & women. Although they claim to be the proved products of the 21st century, but deep down they still cherish & nourish the age old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of men and women has hardly undergone any change".

It is a love story about Maya, a pretty girl who is eager to escape her dull, middle class home in Calcutta for the glamour of Mumbai, where she moves after marriage to Ranjan, a handsome ambitious man who has an American University degree and a wealthy family background.

N.K. Neb states, "Maya in second thoughts suffers due to her financial dependence on Ranjan. Similarly, traditional Indian women like Maya's mother have to request their husbands for money even for their daily needs. Financial security is the basis for women's emancipation."⁸

Maya is determined to be the ideal wife but finds herself trapped & stifled by the confines of her arranged marriage to a man who, she discovers is rigidly conservative and completely indifferent to her desires. When he does not fulfill her fantasies, she becomes unhappy and frustrated. She begins to experience great loneliness in suburban Mumbai. Her emotional cravings are answered by her neighbor Nikhil.

She strikes up a friendship with Nikhil, her charming, college going neighbor, leading to love and betrayal. Maya wants to lead a happy and prosperous life with Nikhil who understands her well. She wants to leave her husband Nikhil supports Maya in all her decisions.

Alka Saxena comments, "Shobha De captures the middle class psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan — his attitude to hold on tight to the purse strings so as to control his women, his lectures on wifely duties, his complete control even on the use of air conditioner"⁹

Maya, a middle class Bengali girl in Calcutta wanted to move to Bombay to escape her dull life. But she found herself trapped by an arranged marriage to Ranjan who was highly conservative and completely indifferent to her desires. She became utterly lonely. At this time she was acquainted to Nikhil, a charming college going boy and a tale of love and betrayal started. Maya, neglected and criticized by her husband and exploited and deceived by her lover, remained a silent sufferer. She was unable to find happiness and satisfaction within marriage and her extra-marital relation also made her utterly frustrated. The novel shows the novelist's insight into human nature. It represents psychic-cum-social complexities of middle class society.

Maya, a textile designer with a dream of becoming a journalist came to Bombay to meet Ranjan Malik with a marriage proposal. Maya was an attractive young girl with warm and rich golden brown skin tone, gleaming jet black hair and large dark eyes. Maya was more fascinated and in love with Bombay. When she met Ranjan, she was more excited at the prospect of settling in Bombay, the city of her dreams. "Marrying Ranjan would make her a part of it immediately- Maya knew she'd be bonded with Bombay forever." (12) Ranjan was a workaholic, brilliant person with a charming personality. He had thick dark hair, intense large eyes, strong chest and muscular shoulders. He had a degree from America and had a good post in a bank. He was a traditional, orthodox person who thought. "It is a woman's duty to run a good home." (11) Mrs. Malik and Ranjan did not approve of working women. Maya's uncle also supported them by saying that "In an Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows." (11) Maya also belonged to a traditional family where a girl has inferior status and her education, career, ambitions, desires and dreams are of secondary importance. She is not free to take any decision of her life. After marriage whether she should pursue education, do job or be a home-maker is completely decided by her husband. That's why even though Ranjan and his mother disapprove of Maya's being a career woman, no one in Maya's family objected. Not even Maya as for Maya marrying Ranjan was like marrying Bombay.

Maya thought that she was "the luckiest girl to get a foreign educated, Bombay based bridegroom" (195) But her newly wed life started with unsuccessful and depressed honeymoon. Ranjan was never comfortable with any woman. He was sexually impotent. In the presence of a wife as ravishing and captivating as Maya, Ranjan did not feel sexually aroused even once, and to hide his impotency, he demonstrated his power over Maya in different ways. Maya asked Ranjan about his lack in sexual urges. But Ranjan reacted very strongly.

What's your problem? You are beginning to sound like some sort of a nymphomaniac.

Are you that sex-starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex being so important to anybody, I've never understood. (351)

Ranjan made Maya merely a captive bird within the four walls of his house. He never appreciated her. He behaved like a dictator. He did not allow her even to mix with the company of women of her age. He did not give money to her and prohibited her to use S.T.D. phone, T.V. and air conditioner. He was totally insensitive towards Maya. He always directed Maya to follow his mother's footsteps. He was a Mumma's baby.

If you want to go anywhere, ask my mother to accompany you (27)

If you have problem understanding things just ask me. And I'll ask my mother (56)

Mummy is a very good house keeper and home maker. She is amazing. May be you should train with her instead of doodling away your time at a drawing board. (66)

Ranjan was strongly influenced by his mother. He selected Maya because she was Mrs. Malik's choice. But Ranjan at the same time spoke with contempt and in sarcastic tone about Maya's parents. Ranjan and Mrs. Malik had a feeling of superiority. They had purposely selected Maya to assert their control over her.

Maya was utterly pained due to Ranjan's loveless attitude. He provided Maya "nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and four square meals a day." (263) In bed, they have been "brothers, or sisters or flat mates. [Because he] was devoid of any passion" (251) Ranjan constantly reminded Maya of her duties as a married woman. And surprisingly at the same time, he used to forget his duties towards her. He never missed a single chance to criticize her. He was never aware of her presence. Instead of discussing the domestic matters to Maya, Ranjan used to discuss them to his mother. Ranjan, a dutiful and loving son failed to be a dutiful and loving husband. Maya was quite sure that if Ranjan continued to maintain stiffness in sex affairs, she would be childless. They never did anything together. Ranjan was not at all interested in her. Under the same roof, they lived as strangers. The following lines from tenth chapter throw light on the emptiness of their relationship. "Hot week day afternoons were to be suffered silently and stoically with just the whirr of noisy ceiling fan to stir the warm air around." (100)

Maya was far away from her parents. There was total communication gap between both of them. She had nobody to talk to. She didn't get any affection or affinity in Ranjan's house. It didn't belong to her as her home.

The house that was how I always referred to this place, even to myself. It was never home. My home. Our home. Always- 'the house'-impersonal, distant, cold. Home continued to be Calcutta. My parental Home (227)

Maya thought herself as a full-time, domestic servant without pay. The insensitive attitude of her husband, constant subjugation and suffering made her a frustrated person. Maya was depressed and frustrated due to Ranjan's loveless attitude and the crippling loneliness. There was no one to whom she could share her feelings. She constantly thought

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belong to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own. (372-73)

Maya tried to share her loneliness to Ranjan "Ranjan, I've been so lonely... all alone in a city that isn't mine. In a house, I don't still feel I belong to." (134) But Ranjan never tried to understand her.

In this frustrated, confused state of mind, Maya met Nikhil, the only son of Dipankar, Ranjan's colleague at bank. Nikhil was completely contrastive to Ranjan. Egoistic Ranjan always criticized Maya whereas talkative and impressive Nikhil flattered her even for smaller things. With the arrival of Nikhil in her life, she began to enjoy life once again. Along with Nikhil, she explored the real Bombay. She felt a kind of freedom which she had never experienced before. She shared smaller things with him. For the first time Maya went on bike with Nikhil to see Bombay and her joy was limitless. She poured out her emotions, "For the first time since my arrival in you city, I felt like laughing, singing, enjoying the salty sea air on my face. I looked at the sky and felt happy." (128) Due to loneliness, lack of physical satisfaction, monotonous routine and emptiness in her married life, Maya was dragged towards Nikhil's magnetic personality. While enjoying life with Nikhil she also felt a kind of guilt that she was betraying Ranjan. She realized that it was wrong for a married woman to go out with a man and deceive her husband. But at the same time, she tried to console herself by saying that it is not at all a sin to go out and breathe fresh air.

Maya liked Nikhil and his company but she never imagined having sexual relationship with him. Nikhil was full of life. He asked her to live life happily instead of suffering silently. Nikhil took advantage of Maya's crippling loneliness and depression and exploited her. He noticed her melancholia and the need of companion. Nikhil started calling her by her first name instead of Didi. He composed a song 'a lonely, lonely lady' on Maya that was heard by her several times and she was pleased to think that she could inspire Nikhil to compose a song. Maya, who was constantly neglected, humiliated and hurt, now for the first time found herself being praised and honored as the song was about her. When Ranjan left for a tour for ten days, Maya felt relieved and carefree. Instead of missing him, she had a strange kind of relief. She felt free of pressure, free of approval seeking, being judged, watched, corrected, scolded, nagged, pushed and instructed. She went along with Nikhil for sightseeing. When Ranjan came back, once again Maya's life became absolutely depressed and pathetic. One day when Ranjan was in the hospital to see his mother, Nikhil came and assaulted her chastity. At first she protested but afterwards she enjoyed the bliss of being one with him. Nikhil kissed her lips, touched her and Maya felt,

Every bit of me was suddenly alive to the feel of Nikhil's lips, hands, arms, neck, chest, knees and legs. An unknown recklessness started to sweep over me. Maybe I was going crazy. I did not want to think of consequences. I refused to assume responsibility. I really didn't care one way or the other. I felt free, lunatic, wonderful. (375)

While they were enjoying physical pleasure, the doorbell and the telephone ring disturbed them but Nikhil asked her to ignore. In the sexual act she poured herself and wanted to swallow Nikhil completely.

I wanted to swallow Nikhil completely... suck him into my womb inch by inch. I want it, oh, so, desperately make him mine. Make him me. (379)

That's what Maya expected from Ranjan. For Maya sexual intercourse means being one. Ranjan never gave this oneness, neither physically nor emotionally. With Nikhil's company she decided to say good bye to her uninspiring life. But Nikhil was never an option to Ranjan. Nikhil's sweet language was deceiving one, his persuasive requests were hypocrite and just a step to seduce Maya physically. After ten days, she knew the news of Nikhil's engagement to Anshu, a Delhi based girl and was shocked to know that she was deceived by him. With the news of Nikhil's engagement all her dreams were shattered. Now she had no choice but to operate in the stifling atmosphere of her arranged marriage. Two totally detached people have to live in the bond of matrimony.

Maya was never a cheap woman. She always had guilt for her friendship with Nikhil. Her marriage to Ranjan was a miss-marriage. Ranjan had married her to satisfy his mother and she had married him to get away from Calcutta and thus they were locked together in a relationship that did not satisfy either of them. Ranjan was not even able to satisfy her physical and

emotional needs. Nikhil told Maya that there was no point in suffering silently and she should “come off it. Act Real. Get Real” (105) Maya fell prey to Nikhil’s well-planned efforts and tricks.

Who is responsible for Maya’s fall? Maya herself? Ranjan and his cold and frigid attitude towards Maya? Valueless, sex-starved youth like Nikhil who was just ready to seize the opportunity? Or age-old, traditional institution of marriage which provides a woman a house to live in, financial security and a family on the price of her identity, individuality? Sex is the base of marriage. As mentioned in the beginning, Kama or the sexual satisfaction is the basic need of life partners. Maya is deprived of sexual pleasure. Can we blame Maya for establishing illicit relationship with Nikhil? It is very clear that in the 21st century, human beings have prospered and progressed materialistically but in the institution of marriage, man is still the lord, the master and a woman, his life time slave. Ranjan never and never thought that Maya was made of flesh and blood and may desire something apart from food and shelter. Maya craved for love both emotional and physical which she didn’t get from Ranjan and Nikhil showered these things on her.

Ranjan was egoistic, mechanical, self-absorbed whereas Nikhil was frank, very sensitive, bubbling with enthusiasm. Maya was fascinated by his compliments, his cutting remarks, and his appreciativeness. Due to Nikhil’s company she started loving, admiring herself. She found her own identity. She found the pleasure and the bliss of physical relationship. In fact, she was emotionally involved in Nikhil but Nikhil cunningly took advantage of her. Nikhil is a product of modern generation, a man who does not mind taking one-night-stands with frustrated married women. Nikhil took advantage of the limitations and weakness of lonely ladies and Maya is just an addition to his endless list. So Maya’s dream world shattered once again. Now there was no way but to stick the monotonous marital relationship with Ranjan. The romance and the bliss in her life were over and she remained a lonely lady forever.

Through Maya, the novelist wants to show that the suffering, the agony of marriage and the long silence that will remain forever in the lives of so many Indian women who accept marriage as a fate traditionally sanctioned to them. Maya is a representative. Even though woman like Maya will try to break the silence, she will have to return once again in the stifling atmosphere of marriage. Life is not a sweet dream but a harsh and bitter reality which a woman has to suffer silently. Maya has no option but to suffer the loneliness in her life. Maya wanted to assert her own identity, she wanted to be aggressive against the hypocritical standards of society but her silent scream stuck somewhere in her throat, unable to push its way out.

The novel projects the psyche of Indian married woman caught and crushed between tradition and nature. The novel not only focuses on the hollowness of Indian marriage but also the hypocrisy and deception in extra-marital relationship which cannot be an option to marriage. Maya’s silent cry for true companionship always remains unheard. The novel also exposes the nature of men. For Ranjan, there was no existence of Maya and for Nikhil, Maya was only an object to be enjoyed sexually. Maya was involved emotionally in Nikhil.

Shobha De defines marriage in the following way. “Marriage to me connotes commitments and surrender, merging with, blending, overlapping and combing. It is a symbolic relationship where one feeds on the other depends on the other, needs the other.”³ But in case of Maya and Ranjan, the commitment, and becoming one is not at all seen. At first Maya tried to understand Ranjan. Actually she liked Ranjan. She made attempts to create physical closeness by touching, stroking and kissing him but Ranjan was always unmoved and aloof. He treated Maya just like a maid. The lack of warmth, caring, understanding, sympathy respect appreciation and love from Ranjan’s side resulted into Maya’s frustration that led to her fall.

Shobha De states the various aspects of marriage.

Marriage is a matter of trust, companionship, affection and sharing. Marriage is also a system to understand other partner’s moods and eccentricities. There is no such thing as a ‘perfect marriage’ or ‘perfect spouse’. Marriage is an ideal union or meeting of two bodies, minds and souls.⁴

But the differences in attitudes, stressful life, personal dissatisfaction, ignorance of sex knowledge, selection of marriage partners by the family members are the reasons of disturbance in Ranjan-Maya marital relationship. Healthy sexual relationship is also quite important in marriage. Maya’s attraction towards Nikhil is due to Ranjan’s impotency.

Conclusion:

Shobha De’s maturity and insightfulness have reached new heights in this novel. It is Shobha De’s master piece which throws light on the traditional Indian marriage in which woman is a silent sufferer.

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