

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

November 2016 – Vol. 5, Issue– 6

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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The Theme of Marriage in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

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Abstract:

The theme of marriage in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* is a conflict between the husband and the wife resulting disharmony in life. In her novel, *Socialite Evening* she brings out the shimmering marital conflict because of lack of emotional warmth, trust sharing and mutual understanding though outwardly the marriage contact is kept going on. All the marriages begin well, but hypocrisy, communication gap, infidelity, sexual dissatisfaction, suspicion, mental incompatibility, jealousy, lack of respect and tolerance and identity, make marital life hollow and shallow bringing frustration and depression. Some of the partners are depicted groping for love and warmth outside marriage whereas few are making efforts to bridge the emotional gap and save their marriages. However, the ever emerging group of women known as new women never compromise with the men in any situation and condition as found in *Socialite Evenings*. These women aim only at glorifying their freedom, movement and achievement in the society where they try to liberate women from social binding. The theme of marriage of this novel gives a vivid picture of the modern trend and concept of the new women.

Keywords: Conflict, gap, marriage, new women, warmth.

Introduction

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* gives us a picture of marginalization of women at the hands of their husbands. She portrays her female characters not only as protagonist but also as motivating factors in society, initiating and regulating their own lives as well as the lives of others in the voluptuously fascinating world of Bombayites, its enticing glitter and glamour enamouring many a Anjali and Karuna to its inspiring and captivating gossamer. Karuna's marriage is a failure since it is loveless, joyless and bridgeless. There is no understanding between husband and wife. She feels that she has married the wrong man for the wrong reason at the wrong time. Her husband is just the average Indian husband who is unexciting, uninspiring and untutored. She detests the standoffish and callous attitude of the husband who often keeps themselves busy in the drab monotonous activities like reading the business page of *The Times of India*. But despite these laxities, a husband is above all a sheltering tree. They are not wholly bad or evil and the wife is only a peripheral being. In the patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the men who shout, hurl, abuse, bully, reproach, criticize and it is the women who listen, tolerate and remain passive. But Shobha De's women are different like Anjali and Karuna. They are not binding vine, yes-persons to bow down in mock subordination. They are new women who fight back, who resist and shout back. If Karuna has an affair with Krish, it is only a means to fulfill her psychological and emotional need.

Such an involvement on the part of her may also be a strategic escape from the claustrophobic and cloistered milieu of her marital life where they live as two separate islands. Educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De's novel *Socialite Evenings* define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death is generally replaced by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contact to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners.

Discussion

Alexander Walker observes that the advantage resulting from the marriage is that the two sexes may reciprocally satisfy the natural desires and they equally submit the exercise of the reproductive organs to a healthful regularity; that they may equally assist each other throughout life by reciprocal affection and cares; that they may in old age receive the cares of their common progeny. Walker goes on to assert that history proves that marriage is essential to the well-being of human society. According to Shobha De, the change in attitude towards marriage represents a big forward and therefore, she says, "The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a meal ticket. Divorce too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage..." (*Shooting from The Hip*:12). Shobha De in her *Socialite Evenings* presents a picture of the institutions of marriage prevalent among the wealthy classes of the Indian society. The portrayal is authentic, because the narrator-writer belongs to the rich set, which is the focus of attention in the novel. The marriage of Anjali, the narrator's friend and one time mentor typifies the concept of marriage prevailing in the rich classes. The dubious factors instrumental in her marriage set the tone of her marriage and that of other marriages in the novel. Anjali is a pretty, young girl who joins Air India as a hostess. Abe has been an experienced rake with a wild reputation. Something about Anjali's almost frigid demeanor has attracted him. Initially he imagines that she will be another quick pick-up. But, by the time they land in London, Anjali has managed to hook Abe.

But marriage puts no restraint at all on Anjali and Abe in their respective sexual orgies. Abe has some regulars with whom he sleeps, apart from the occasional pick-ups. No jealousy pangs are aroused in Anjali who is quite preoccupied with her own sexual encounters. Feeling bored with nothing meaningful to do, Anjali starts taking French lessons and lands herself in the bed of the young French teacher, though she has declared to him that she is a married woman, much older and really not one of those sleep around types. She hopes to go to France with the French lover for a fortnight orgy of sex with him. To an unhappy Karuna, her sagacious advice is, "You are bored with your husband. You need an affair" (*Socialite Evenings*: 95). Even as she is giving her this suggestion, Anjali announces her next affair. In the narrator's words, "She was in love again, but this time she managed to stun me" (*Socialite Evenings*: 95). This time she has picked up a boy, fit to be her son, as he is approximately her daughter Mimi's age. After her divorce from Abe, Anjali is so desperately on the look-out for

a catch to marry that her situation becomes simultaneously amusing and pathetic. She tells Karuna that she would grab a rich person and available, and Karuna promises to be on the prowl for one. Eventually, Anjali does get her rich and 'available' man. Kumar is exceedingly rich. He promptly divorces his second wife to get married to Anjali. But it is most ironical that Anjali, a woman perpetually on heat gets saddled with a husband who is a "gay" and has his workouts on the young boy, Murty. But, then from now on, rather abruptly and unconvincingly she turns to spiritualism, and maintains a beatific relationship with Lord Krishna, leaving Kumar to carry on his homosexual amours with Murty and other young boys. She has transformed herself into a sexless religious minded devotee.

The theme of other marriages is not much different from that of Anjali. Karuna's sister gets divorced from her engineering husband in England and lives alone, practicing as a doctor in London. The narrator, Karuna who is restrained by her middle-class background and morality for some time, breaks loose of the marital bond and starts a torrid affair with the husband's friend Krish, who is a married man, but a confirmed rake. Karuna and her husband call each other only husband and wife which denotes the impersonality. Karuna is not an average Indian wife who would readily stoop to conquer in order to gain control over her husband. To her marriage turns out pretty terrific since her husband is an average Indian husband. Emotionally and intellectually there is incompatibility between Karuna and her husband. In the depiction of this incompatibility in husband-wife relationship, Shobha De suggests that a woman of Karuna's type who loves freedom and self-discovery finds marriage to an average man as increasingly meaningless and their love making a listless affair, a vague habit and a passionless mechanical encounter. It is very likely for such a woman to estrange from her husband. To come out of boredom, she has an extra-marital relationship. Karuna is conscious of the fact that she is committing adultery, but she continues to plunge deeper into it with feeling of spite against the husband, as it were, and she says, "I'd feel like a harlot self-consciously sneaking up to solicit customers" (*Socialite Evenings*: 175). In response to her friend Ritu's question, if he wants to marry her, Karuna pours forth her passion, "I don't know. I don't care. I want him. I'll go crazy" (*Socialite Evenings*: 173). Ritu's advice in the matter is to give him up, for he cannot and will not marry her. Interestingly each advises the other against some affair or the other, but the reason for dissuading is not morality; it is mainly that the lover is not rich enough to provide a life of luxury. Karuna in order to have sexual orgy with Krish leaves for London on the pretext of spending some time with her sister there. But then her affair is exposed and her husband suddenly lands in London to thrash things out with her. She not only does not feel ashamed of the betrayal against her husband but adopts a belligerent stance about her intended trip to Rome. He is prepared to forget about everything, but she desists from her intended holiday in Rome with Krish. But she holds her ground, declaring, "I love this friend of yours and I want to be with him in Venice" (*Socialite Evenings*:186).

Anajali's comment on Karuna's affair later speaks volumes of the altitude of the upper class towards sexual morality. Ritu is another woman in the novel whose marriage, too, goes haywire, because she, too, is bitten by the love bug. She falls for Gul, a shady character in Bombay who is rolling in wealth. She speaks the same language which the promiscuous

women use in the novel. But this supposedly love relationship turns them into a whore and pimp who literally procure virgins for Gul and his friends. She begins to booze, consumes drugs puts on lot of weight and looks eminently suitable for the part that Gul makes her play that of the procuress. But having suffered mental and physical torture at the hands of her lover she returns to her husband, who readily takes back a sexually violated, physically and mentally wrecked wife. Everything is forgiven and forgotten which makes it appear like a fairy tale. As against these families and marriages, we have Karuna's parents, a middle-class family that suffer the pains and hurts of life. But they stick together through thick and thin, lending each other the much needed moral support, providing to each other the feeling of togetherness, and maintaining an affectionate relationship. Marriage for them is the bedrock of faithfulness, fidelity and mutual support. They exemplify the traditional Hindu view of marriage according to which mutual fidelity till death is the highest law for the husband and wife to follow.

Conclusion

In modern Indian society, a woman cannot just ignore her independence in order to seek a husband's protection and particularly when the husband turns out to be a wrong one and the marriage becomes a monotonous affair. Marriage is treated as a powerful game only for the sake of social security and convenience. When the wife is not in good terms with the husband, she can either divorce him or leave him for her personal benefit. There is no question of conscience or morality. She is free to do what she likes because she is no more dependent on her husband financially. What she desires is equal status, sharing and caring between them. If one of them loses the social tie of marriage, then the result will be either divorce or hellish domestic life. In *Socialite Evenings* Anjali and Karuna never takes marriage seriously. Divorce is treated seriously in the conservative Indian society and it takes place when the husband or the wife is unbearably cruel but it naturally happens that the husband is found to be extremely cruel. But Anjali and Karuna pay no attention to the social code of conduct or social approval. What they do, is what their hearts say. These women long only for their personal satisfaction and pleasure. They no longer want to be the passive followers of their husband. So, the theme of marriage in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* portrays male and female characters, so-called husband and wife in such a way that they no longer pay due attention to the morality, custom and tradition of the Indian society. They are concerned more with the luxurious and comfortable life.

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