

The male world of Shoba De: A study of socialite evenings

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Abstract

Though Shoba De is a staunch feminist, she has presented her characters – both female and male – masterly. The image of man that emerges from Shobha De's novels is generally negative. A male character is frequently portrayed as seducer, exploiter, wife-beater, rapist, torturer or a cruel, callous husband. She has presented men as beings who are present in her novels to satisfy the lust for money, fame, status and insatiable craving of one or more female characters. It has made her able to reduce men to insignificance so that her novels become various harsh messages given by a woman writer to the patriarchal society.

Keywords: character, marriage, feminism, sex, husband, seducer etc.

Introduction

Shobha De is regarded as the most popular of the new women writers. Shobha De is regarded as a feminist whose women characters are portrayed to fight for their rights as well as love, respect, sympathy and understanding from the male partners. For the novelist understands that society consists of both men and women and the role of men cannot be negated in the life of women. There is no doubt that Shobha De as a novelist has marvelous understanding of the feminine psyche and explores the world of the urban women; but she emerges in her novels an accomplished painter of the masculine mind also.

This novelist strikes the latest trend in her feminist stance of rejecting the male hegemony outrightly. "Her writings constitute a strong literary bashing of the Indian male. Through her novels she tries to shatter the unsympathetic and uncivilized attitude of callousness and indifference of men towards women." (Ningthoujam, 105) She emphasizes the need for recognition of equivalence of power between men and women. In her novels male hierarchy is no longer the chief principle. Man's prerogative to lead life as he pleases has lapsed. Women in her novels are powerful enough to decide what is best for them. They do not accept and male interference in their affairs. (Ningthoujam, 107)

Shobha De has expressed this idea in the following words:

Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level. This is not news. Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone. At times their very lives have depended on it. The single women in the cities has emerged as a distinct species during the past ten years. Hers is a unique and difficult position. That she may have opted to remain single is always the last consideration. Single by choice is OK for men, but not for women – not yet. A bachelor in his forties is not necessarily the object of speculation and gossip. A single women of the same age is Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and exploited for the furtherance of overall human development. The very concept of the sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive. Rage can never replace understanding.

Through generations of propaganda, women have been brainwashed into sustaining the myth of male supremacy. This continued state of suspended insecurity has to be dispelled for any intelligent dialogue between the sexes to begin. When one talks of shakti unleashed, one also remembers the two connotations of shakti – the avatar is as potent as the creative one. It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that can lead to creative and dynamic harmony... Men will have to come to terms with women power... It is the voice of reason and logic. (Shoba De, 111-13)

The image of man that emerges from Shobha De's novels is generally negative. A male character is frequently portrayed as a seducer, exploiter, wife-beater, rapist, torturer or a cruel, callous husband. In fact, Shobha De projects the image of the new women craving for equal status with man; she has no hesitation in fighting the male hegemony with zeal. In order present her women as fighters the novelist has to present her female characters her female characters as great fighters and not silent acceptors of injustice and ill treatment from the patriarchal society. She has presented men as beings who are present in the novels to satisfy the lust for money, fame, status and insatiable lust of one or more female characters. It has made her able to reduce men to insignificance so that her novels become various harsh messages given by a woman writer to patriarchal society:

De's novels emphasize that men should wash their minds clean of such an absurd notion as the woman should be kept in a subordinate position at home and in the society. The indifference and callous attitude shown by man towards a woman's feelings and sentiments is responsible for the rise of the new woman. Tired of the male-centred culture, the new woman wants to bring about a radical transformation of the existing society so that women may have their own voice and respectability and enjoy equal rights with man. (Ningthoujam, 113)

As Shobha De is a feminist, she has given a negative portrayal of man even if ideological bias might triumph over the artistic

requirements. Men have to be portrayed in her novels, but their pictures as husbands of lovers are determined by the dictates of her feminist ideology:

An important form of feminist rebellion against the patriarchal structure is the attack on family which gets manifested in sexual freedom, that is, extramarital relationships. While the women in the novel go round indulging in promiscuous sex, the husbands are made to tolerate or ignore it. (Chandra, 90)

Men in *Socialite Evenings* have certain common traits which they share with their counterparts in other novels. They are filled with desire for excessive sex in the first place. They usually succeed because women in the novel depend on men for their sexual gratification through they are independent of their male partners in matters of money:

A more effective mode of male control is reflected in De's portrayal of the woman's sexual dependence. The heroines start off as sexual libertines. And yet, they all fall pray to the "I-cannot-live-without-a-male" syndrome. Anjali gives up her career, independence and a husband for the homosexual Kumar. Ritu's villainous Gul goes so far as to humiliate her in public. The heroines are attracted to the masculinity of the male in *Socialite Evenings*. (Nayar, 109)

The novel is a study of power equation between men and women. Its creator has transformed this material into a novel in which Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees. She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. (Selden, 535)

The female desire for getting success economically at every cost enables men to take undue advantage. As they are filled with desire to control women, they refashion their identity:

The men control the institutions through financial power (Abe, Gul), intellect (Girish, Ranbir) or sheer sexual dominance (Karan, Peirre the Frenchman). The only identities allowed to women are: mothers, modes, (or "dumb beauties") housewife, or bed-mates. These roles make the woman independent. (Dodiya, 111)

Some of the male characters in *Socialite Evenings* are good men. But they are insensitive to the feelings of their partners with the result that they fail to make their wives satisfied or happy. It is as much true about the unnamed husband of Karuna as about the husbands of her friends:

All the husbands of my friends more or less fell into this pattern. They were not evil men, but what they did to our lives went beyond evil. We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was 'You don't really count, except in the context of my priorities.' It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof

over our heads and four square meals a day. A friend bitterly recalled how her husband would taunt her during their frequent fights, 'What did you marry me for? All you were looking for was a meal ticket.' And here was this woman, a qualified surgeon, feeling humiliated and demoralized enough to actually half-believe what he was saying. 'I can't help it. He brainwashes me constantly. I'm made to feel obliged and in debt.' (Socialite Evening, 61)

Ritu's husband is equally insensitive to her as is evident from the following discussion between the two when she wants to dress differently from what he desires because she wants to wear this for a change:

'You mean you hate looking like all other wives? You want to look "different" and attract attention. OK, hurry up now – there's no time to argue. But remember, you are upsetting me with your attitude. I don't like defiance.' Well, well, he was certainly playing assertive husband to the hilt! I was tempted to ask him about his attitudes. What about all those things he did that upset me? What about his insensitivity and, yes, defiance? What about the nauseating stench of stale cigarettes and the stomach-turning smell of whisky combined with oily tandoori food? What about my avulsion over his horrible safari suits or my anger at the gum he constantly chewed? What about his manners in bed, the loud belches in my face! (Socialite Evening, 75)

The latter part of the passage is feministic in tone but at the same time it indicates the insensitive attitude of the male partner. However, Karuna's husband, though too insignificant to be given a name, is better in attitude than Ritu's. She had sexual transgression which no Indian husband would have tolerated. But Karuna's husband is not angry so much with her as with her boyfriend. He is not surprised at his way because "Krish was a lowdown bastard". For he is surprised with her affair with Krish, a man who is not her type, but a pseudo through and through. He asks karuna:

'What do you see in that creep? When did all this start – don't tell me it was that night when he came to our house and drank up all my scotch Lowdown bastard. I'm going to expose him. I'll fix him. I'll see to it that he loses his job and is out on the street. I'll see him in the gutter. He will pay for this. But before that I have to deal with you'. I admire your nerve. They way you are playing the high and mighty role, one would imagine the whole thing was my fault. Just get off your high horse and face life – you aren't in one of your books now, and I'm not the understanding husband they show in films. I have come here to thrash things out and I mean business. (Socialite Evening, 175)

When Karuna tells him that she has planned to go to Venice with Krish, he does not agree. When she offers a deal, he reacts sharply:

A deal? What are you talking about. I haven't come her to make any bloody deal with you. Get it straight right now – you see him one more time and you're out of my house – out! I've thought over the whole thing carefully. I would've thrown you out right now – but I'm prepared to give you one more chance. I'm not a mean man. You've

been a good wife. I don't really have any major complaints against you. I'm prepared to cancel this one black mark on your performance record and start with a clean slate. But you have to swear you'll never see or keep in touch with that man again. I think I'm being more than fair. No other husband would've reacted like this – but I said to myself, you are human, you have sinned, but I must be generous and forgive you.' (*Socialite Evening*, 176)

She had clearly acted against what the eighteenth century religious scholar, Tryambakayajvan, had prescribed for pativratas in his book *Stridharmapaddhati*. The sets of rules in this book describe what type of life of life a good Hindu wife should lead:

Indian Women needed to conform to the rules of religious law as they were considered to be innately wicked and impure.

Tryambakayajvan stresses the importance of the stridharma as the only means for salvation. The ideal Hindu wife must be totally devoted to her husband: she must sever and obey one's husband as one's guru and she must worship him as one's only god. (Nubile, 10)

Therefore when she tries to give her husband a slip, he gets irritated and tells her that a number of things about her do not suit him. He asserts himself now:

I think I've been far too much of a gentleman and kept quiet for too long. My mother used to warn me. She showed me the telephone bills. I don't know how I didn't suspect even after that. She asked me whether I was making all those STD calls. But I trusted you so much, it never occurred to me that you were a woman of such low morals. I'm cursing myself for being such a fool – but, like I told my mother, these women changed you. You were not like them when we got married, otherwise I would never have married you.' (*Socialite Evening*, 177)

It is not he alone but Karuna herself who knows in her heart of hearts that her husband is not a bad man, "The husband was very understanding and I think I liked him better than I'd ever done before for his grace," (*Socialite Evening*, 190) But she stretches the rubber beyond limit and misuses his gracefulness so much that he entirely loses faith in her. Therefore, when she tries to convince him that the child that she is carrying is his, he refused to accept that it is his or even his friend Krish's. When she asks him whose baby it may be, he answers with a question:

How would I know? These days you are up to all sorts of tricks but I don't trust you. If you could screw around with my friend Krish, right under my nose, you could be screwing the whole town. Adultery is an addiction – it's only the first time that's difficult. After that, it's only a matter of one fuck here of there – isn't that right?' (*Socialite Evening*, 207)

She offers to get the pregnancy terminated if he does not agree to accept the baby. But it is too late now for he has decided finally that he is to divorce her. He is good; he has been gullible till now. But he has found her to be too sinful to

continue his married life with her. He had consulted his lawyer is Bombay and had known that after her stay with Krish in Venice, there was no chance for her:

'Fine, fine, fine. But my fine lady it's not all that easy. You may walk into some clinic and get you dirty little secret removed. But how do you think I'm going to live with this? I'm not prepared to forget about the whole thing and pretend nothing's happened. Why should I? I don't trust you any longer.' I don't think there's any point in continuing this farce. I've been thinking about it. We'd better call it off. (*Socialite Evening*, 207)

But as against Karuna's husband is Krish, the pretentious adman who is crooked man. He is fortunate to have a wife who helps him actively in his extramarital affairs. He is a pretending man ever since his early life. Though he poses to be a communist and had sympathy for the naxalites, he is neither. His ways compelled his father to send him to a law school in America. But after coming back to India he decided to join a job in a law agency. He did not look like what he was and he looked like what he was not. He met Karuna and her husband on one his visits to Bombay and was invited to their home. He discovered some prospects in his dealing with her and they began to meet each other and use subterfuge to camouflage then person who had introduced them to each other, "Then there were all the rules that adultery immediately imposes:" He does not hesitate in deceiving Karuna who has full faith in him. The discovery shocks and saddens her.

Things become clearer when Karuna's husband tries to open her eyes. The episode has already been discussed in the chapter earlier. He knows that his wife has spent a good amount of his money on her lover for he is "that selfish bastard":

That two-bit gigolo – all his life he has lived off women. That's why he married this girl – not out of love or anything. Well, I found out a few things before getting here. She is the only child of a wealthy zaminder. Krish lives off her – the car, driver, the holiday home in Kalimpong. – he is treated as a joke. What does he do when he gets to the office? It's all big talk, nothing else. (*Socialite Evening*, 179)

Krish shows his character to Karuna in Venice when he asks her whether her husband had left enough money to buy them a goodbye gift. And it convinces her that he is not her dream boyfriend but "a shallow, exploitative, utterly ordinary," and "even less than that, human being". (*Socialite Evening*, 183) He has been exposed so much before her that his later proposal does not impress her and Karuna turns him out.

One of the traits of male characters in *Socialite Evenings* is their apathy to social norms and values. We may take the case of Abe (Abba Tyabjee) who has been presented with preference for young girls. Anjali, his wife, who has been shown getting her beautiful body photographed by him, finds awful, dirty panties and a scruffy bra of a girl behind by him. He has no charm, no personality, "But an ape he truly was – brutal and boorish. In some ways, he reminded me of Aristotle Onassis, the same crude arrogance that money breeds. Even the same sort appearance including enormous, tortoise-shell glasses," (*Socialite Evening*, 33), says the narrator about him.

His wife regards him as generous and considerate. But she fears “just that mussalman part of his nature that ruins everything.” (*Socialite Evening*, 33) She is afraid of his weakness for young girls: “I have lost all my girlfriends to Abe. The minute he meets them, he starts his seduction plans. It doesn’t take very long. One lunch, two drinks – and boom – they’re in bed.” (*Socialite Evening*, 35)

Another male character that is a typical product of Shobha De is Kumar who is presented as a typical Rajasthani bridegroom. The following presentation is deceptive for we know the truth about it later:

He was wearing far too much jewellery even for a bridegroom, but I pardoned the excess, thinking the poor man must’ve got carried away and if not on his wedding day, then when? He was standing a cluster of men knocking back their drinks with exaggerated gusto. Punjabi high spirit, I figured. Out of this bunch, my attention was drawn to a dark-complexioned young man standing beside Kumar with a scowl on his face. What seemed odd was the manner in which he hung on to Kumar’s right hand, refusing to release it even when the other wanted to light a cigarette. Perhaps he’s a young brother or nephew, I thought. (*Socialite Evening*, 114)

But a month later the narrator was told by her friend Anjali the truth about Kumar:

‘Kumar’s gay, you know, he’s a homo’.
 ‘Then why did he marry you and those two other women?’
 ‘Because he needed a front – he couldn’t possibly marry Murty or any of the other boys’.
 ‘I thought he was being very romantic when he insisted on that no-going-to-bed-before-wedding clause. I was so touched. This was the first time a man was treating me like a decent woman. I thought it was his way of showing respect’.
 ‘I believed Kumar when he told me that Murty was an orphan he had picked up somewhere. He said he’d felt sorry for the boy and decided to “adopt” him – not legally. But he paid for his education, gave him a roof over his head, employed him in his company – and generally looked after him – that’s all.’
 ‘Then, when did you discover that Murty was his bedmate?’
 ‘Kumar broke down on our wedding night. Maybe he was drunk or maybe Murty had created a scene. He told me I would have to accept him in our life – like his previous wives had’ (*Socialite Evening*, 117-18)

Thus, male characters in *Socialite Evenings* do not care for their women who, in turn, are equally negligent towards their male friends or husbands. As in other novels or hers, Shobha De has portrayed the males to suit her feminist approach. Thus, had Abe not been an experienced rake with a wild reputation, the novelist would never have picked him up. It is such a male character that helps her to make trickery the basis of marriage and justify the following statement: “Marriage and family are the means used by society to control promiscuous sex and dissipation of man’s energy which could be directed and used in many other usual channels, without at the same time, suppressing sex”. Women like men in the novel for no

other reason than orgasms and if they discard them, they do so for they are incapable of offering terrible orgasm.

The study on the male characters in the novels of Shobha De has, thus, made certain points clear. Almost all of them are flat characters or at the most, flat characters pretending to be round. They hardly ever seem to change. What I want to suggest is that most of them are sex-maniacs and have no scruples about sexuality. Of course, their indulgence in sex is such that it enables the novelist to fulfill her purpose as a staunch feminist.

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