

THE FEMINIST AGGRANDIZEMENT IN SHOBHA DE'S, SOCIALITE EVENINGS

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Shobha De has been a dynamic personality of nearly three decades; she has been the reigning deity of the written world. For years she has defined what society has been about and focused on the world of man and matters. De was born in Maharashtra on January 7, 1948; 7:21:00; 5:30 (E of GMT); 72E50; 18N58. According to Phyllis Chubb her fiery ascendant Sagittarius, as an odd numbered sign, sets the stage for an independent, open-minded, frank, generous, sympathetic, and truthful and just one individual.(Chubb:2002:issue:03)

She has thrived on a well as survive the Polaris responses – the highest praise and the vilest criticism. Given to controversies, her literary status as a serious writer with social consciousness has been subjected to endless debates, ranging from heated to the most-heated arguments between her passionate adulators and merciless detractors. With three of her novels *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights* and *Sisters*, taken up as course materials by The School of Oriental African Studies and a few Indian Universities, Shobha De is viewed seriously as a writer of literary and social worth.

Socialite Evenings (1989) is the very first novel of Shobha De. The novel is a memoir, the life-so-far of a Mumbai socialite. This is a cinematic frame-by-frame recapitulation of Karuna's life. Going down the lanes and by lanes of memory of the novel traces her metamorphosis from a middle-class woman into a socialite star.

The Indian society has been voicing for woman's equality with man in the last couple of years. The second generation of women novelists e.g. Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande, has challenged the dominated social system of our country. Making a feminist approach, SP Swain analyses the novel, which gives us the picture of marginalization of the Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Subhash Chandra discusses *Socialite Evenings* as a novel that presents the institution of marriage and family existing in the wealthy class of the Indian society. According to him this portrayal is authentic being an inside story, because the narrator (the writer) herself belongs to this class.

Karuna is presented by the author as G B Shaw presented his women characters in a Raina or an Ann Whitefield in equally unromantic realism. Karuna doesn't want to follow the rules provided to her by her parents. As far as the heroines of other Indo-English women writers are concerned, they are quite different from De's heroines.

According to Inna Walter in her *An Invitation Tale from Innocence to Experience (Fiction of the Nineties)*:

...Anita Desai makes psychological forays into the minds of her women characters, and Kamala Markandaya depicts rural or urban women as victims of their circumstances. Shobha De depicts Karuna a young Indian from a middle class family able to circumvent her lot in life and launch into the kind of life style of modeling and independent journalistic essays that is still not acceptable in conventional Indian society.

A neat tripartite division of Karuna's life-before marriage, life in marriage and life after separation from her husband-gives a revealing account of her needs and frustrations.

The need for identity, an exclusively and peculiarly human need, is a very significant meta-need hierarchy of Abraham H. Maslow. This need for identity is the major motivating force throughout Karuna's life. When an individual experiences a sense of belongingness in interpersonal relationship with a social or cultural or religious or professional or racial or familial group, by sharing its beliefs and practices, it means the individual has a satisfactory identity. The mutual acceptability instills confidence and pride which in turn becomes the motivating and directing force of life.

A sense of identity which the individual finds or achieves makes him feel comfortable with himself and with others. The lack of at-oneness, breeds estrangement, freezes an individual's sense of self-worth and alienates him from his "real self". It also spoils the interpersonal relationships and ultimately hampers the growth towards self-actualization or self-fulfillment. When analyzed from the angle of this proposition, the flash back of the two decades of Karuna's life centers around her inability to commit herself to the prevalent value system of the middle-class in her efforts to find an identity for herself.

Karuna's need for forging an identity and the subsequent search for it becomes marked since her formative years. Initially it takes the form of the desire to be "different" – "a different girl" – and persists throughout her adolescence. Entering into marriage, she is pushed to the verge of losing her sense of identity. Her urge to maintain her identity as a "different wife" suffers a serious setback in the hostile atmosphere. The fear of being deprived of an identity and unwillingness to forego her "differentness" make her feel the need for identity all the more poignant.

In the third phase, after her divorce, Karuna's attempt to fashion her identity becomes more impelling, more powerful and more mature. Incorporated into the matrix of Karuna's need for identity are the other needs like the need for love and companionship, the need for security, the need for self-esteem and above all the need for self-fulfillment leading to self-actualization. Urbashi Barat writes in her "From Victim to Non-Victim: Socialite Evenings as a Version of *Kiinstlerroman*" [The Fiction of Shobha De]:

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and enduring theme in the novel is the search for identity and selfhood. (Miles: 1990)

Karuna's struggle towards the formation of an identity becomes obvious when she is roughly between twelve and nineteen years of age. This adolescent period is the main focus of psychologists and behaviorists as being the highly significant segment in the chart of human life. The development of new dimensions of thinking and behavior is perceivable during this time. At this stage the ways in which the individual gets affected by society, especially the peer group, has an important role in the individual's attempt to accomplish himself/herself with a sense of identity. First, Karuna becomes preoccupied with her body and appearance. Next, she feels that

the oppressive and dull atmosphere of her home and her insignificant social status do not offer her suitable avenues for recognition and satisfaction.

The conflict between a positive valence and a negative valence i.e., Karuna's yearnings "...to be part of the smart and beautiful set..." and her unwillingness to be contented with her middle class status causes great anxiety. To cope with anxiety, she builds up an ideal image of herself as a different person from others and wages a relentless battle to see herself higher than others. She asserts, "I wanted to be different because I wasn't rich". She was "...oppressed at home and hungering for things she didn't have" (Socialite Evenings: 1989:2:7)

Karuna's desire to be noticed and recognized by others, which keeps smoldering within, often lets off sparks in little acts of insubordination to parental control like whistling, being cheeky with relatives, pouring into the piles of comics, etc. Dressing style often becomes a common and available source in the revelation of Karuna's sense of identity and she wears her sash hipster-style to assert herself. Another important element is an individual's need to form and assert identity at adolescence, manifests in the individual's seeking appropriate feed-back from others in daily interpersonal relationships. At home her little transgressions are admonished as defiance. Her sisters do not understand her and she does not want to understand them either. So, she befriends the rebellious and tart Charlie, her classmate. She goes one step further. She externalizes the awareness of her sexual identity by developing a love relationship with Bunty, which is one more step in rebellion.

Fed on the illusory stuff of the silhouette romances, Karuna develops a distorted concept of identity and betrays a proclivity for fantasizing about,... holiday bungalow in the hills, a personal ayah of my very own...carry my imported school-bag, a uniformed hamaal to fetch me hot lunch ... embroidered table mat with knives, forks and dessert spoons, fragrant shampoos to wash my hair ... ham sandwiches and a chilled Coco Cola ... (Socialite Evenings: 7) Etc. which she believes would give her satisfaction. She frankly accepts her hunger was great and grew greater day by day for it was never fed. Intensified by fantasies, her naïve fascination is reinforced by 'The Stories' of Mills and Boons and 'Gone with the Wind' and she is far removed from a realistic perception of life. Like Scott Fitzgerald's Gloria Gilbert, the debutant and female apotheosis of succulent illusions, Karuna strongly believes that she needs a stylish life and social prominence to give her the desired identity.

A hobby or job, at times partly, sometimes fully, contributes to the formation and the gratification of the need for identity. Karuna adamantly takes to modeling because she finds it serving her double purpose at once. It satisfies her need for novelty of experience as well as her urge to escape the middle class humdrumness and its approved but distasteful hobbies like cooking, knitting, crocheting, embroidering, making rangoli's etc., that were thought fit for girls of respectable middle class families. Featuring in an advertisement, she feels immensely elated that she had entered the charming circle of rich girls. Karuna's move towards a false culture and misconstrued identity takes a serious turn, with her introduction to Anjali. At first Karuna considers her initiation into Anjali's patronage as instrumental in fulfilling her dreams.

The friendship between them takes a new turn when Anjali came to know that Karuna is interested in an ad-film-maker with whom Anjali wants to set up a family. While Karuna was surprised to know that Anjali was herself trying to involve Karuna in her husband's activities but soon the young girl waits for an opportunity to break herself with Anjali when she goes to New York on holidays.

...the original yokel, well, perhaps with a superficial polish – in a state of suspended excitement prepared for anything – everything. For the very first time, I felt ready. On my own, free of family influences and pressures, free of Anjali, prepared to discover the world on my own terms. (Socialite Evenings: 42)

And at this moment the journey for self-realization starts. When she returns home she seems totally different to the family members and they also behave strange to her.

The corollary to Karuna's gorgeous illusions of identity is her romantic picture of an over idealized, prospective life partner. In the company of a dream- world hero, Karuna hopes to step up into the glories of the world of the rich and the famous. Besides her knowledge of Feminists like Germain Greer and Gloria Steinam, her trip to New York fills her with new fangled ideas of identity as a liberated woman. This is reflected in her abrupt cancellation of her betrothal with Bunty with whom she had been courting for some time. The reason Karuna adduces to this cancellation is the ordinariness of Bunty. Thereafter she decides to explore and discover her identity in her own terms. In other words, Karuna seeks wealth and its attendant social status to give her direction. Material prosperity, class mobility and glamour are set as the parameters of her identity. Karuna moves fast towards the achievement of these goals at the end of the first phase of her life.

Urbashi Barat confirms, in her article, "From Victim to Non-Victim: Socialite Evenings as A Version of Kiinstlerroman" [The Fiction of Shobha De] that, Karuna thus begins her quest for selfhood from Atwood's 'Basic Victim Position Three', in which the protagonist "acknowledge[s] the fact that [she is] a victim but refuse[s] to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable ... the basic game of Position Three is repudiating the Victim role". She is thus very different from the traditional Bildungsroman hero, who moves from innocence to experience ... (Dodiya Jaydipsinh: 121)

In the second phase of Karuna's life, she acquires a new role to play as the wife of a rich businessman. Her parents are happy at least about their daughter. They thought they have provided a better suit to their daughter and gifted her secure message. Besides her longing for a romantic life and her need for freedom, which she hopes her marriage to grant, other needs like, the need for love and understanding, the need for emotional and physical security and satisfaction, the need for communication and recognition, the need for a sense of belonging and above all the need for personal fulfillment and individual growth, come to the surface clamoring for gratification

Karuna's efforts to get grafted in the rich society ultimately render her rootless, bitter and lonely. Her loneliness acquires terrifying proportions as she experiences it amidst crowd. Of such an ironic condition in which the remedy sought to bring relief worsens the malady, Karen Horney offers a metaphoric description. According to her, when a wanderer in the desert under the fatigue and thirst sees a mirage, he may make actual efforts to reach it, but the mirage which should end his distress is itself a product of his imagination, hence, cannot quench his thirst, it deepens his misery.

Karuna reasons out in self-pity that her marriage went sour because she had "married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time". Escaping one form of overt regimentation at her parent's home, Karuna feels she is fallen a victim to a subtle and covert form of regimentation in her husband's home. She complains that she has been much taken for granted, forced to fall into the overall scheme of things of her husband and has been tricked into a calculated deal. (Socialite Evenings: 57)

At a time when Karuna finds life highly unendurable, the arrival of Krish, a Calcutta based dramatist, serves a welcome change in her life. Krish attracts Karuna with all the right things – poetry, theatre and politics. Karuna is swept off-guard by his well-timed compliments with a bunch of chameleons on top of them. Though it is a torrid affair, it cannot be attributed on her part. Rather, her infidelity really represents a quest for what her marriage had failed to provide. Karuna is not up to adultery for adultery's sake. However, in this extra – marital affair too, she meets with disappointment and admits with pain that the grand romance she was looking for just seemed not to exist.

In course of time Karuna's love-need becomes quite matured. In one of her references to her expectation from marriage, she says that she couldn't spend her life swooning on flowers and gorging chocolates. It is a clear indicator of her urge for something besides and beyond mere fun and romance to keep her happy. The most vital, but the least gratified desire of Karuna is the need to communicate freely and fully with a partner at the same wave length, verbally as well as through thoughtful demonstrations, little acts of affection, tender gestures and friendly chats. According to Karuna, conjugal felicity lies in a lot of caring and sharing to find a resonance in relation.

In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the male who remains at the top. In a family only a male shouts, abuses, tortures, criticizes and it is the woman who listens, suffers and remain passive. Women become "yes-persons" in meek subordination.

Karuna is a victim to this kind of domestic violence. Non-communication breeds boredom. Boredom assumes gigantic proportions and disorganizes Karuna's sense of self-worth. Boredom being the worst of energy-sappers kills her zest for life, stamina and resilience completely.

Emotional gratification and sexual satisfaction are continually operating psychic urges also. Though not only the primary condition, emotional gratification is one of the primary conditions to be satisfied if an individual is to move towards higher needs and finally towards self-actualization. Karuna's concept of conjugal felicity and physical intimacy is a happy coming together on real feelings. On the contrary, her psychologically sophisticated sensibility is crudely shocked at the smugness and crassness of her husband. He turns it into a mechanical affair, more a miserable than a fulfilling experience. Karuna makes no bones about it:

Our love-making (if I could call it that) was a listless affair. I would tell my husband, in the days when we still had something going between us, that he generally felt like sex only on the days he skipped the regular workout at the health club. Making love was losing calories to him. I saw it as nothing more than a vague habit ... I could've done without it forever. (SocialiteEvenings: 59)

As she tries to cope with dissatisfaction and disillusionment, Karuna naturally develops emotional frigidity. She feels grateful to her husband, only when she is spared of the passionless, mechanical encounters in bed.

Karuna's frustration acquires a deeper tinge, when she suddenly becomes aware of her economic insecurity, immediately after her separation from her husband. She is literally stripped off all her possessions and stands homeless and penniless on the streets her daily subsistence is under jeopardy. That she had been at the mercy of her husband's financial resources for her social prestige, luxury and security, her agony becomes all the more excruciating. Karuna learns from Ritu that:

...men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment. (Socialite Evenings: 79)

But she herself could not condition her husband that way. Thus at the beginning of the third phase of Karuna's life the various aspects of her love, security and esteem needs remain still unfulfilled. She is left with blurred hopes of self-actualization. For the first time she feels the need of a room and money of her own. An average amount of salary was enough to afford a middle class way of living. With the help of Anjali, she takes up a lucrative job which transports her into a luxurious life. Freedom is better enjoyed than gold hence her new life started giving her the absolute joy. When people asked her to quit her part-time job for a lucrative business, she muses:

I suppose my real concerns were different. It wasn't money or success I was looking forward to in my life at that point it was the freedom to do what I wanted. My part-time job gave me that. (Socialite Evenings: 265-266)

Karuna looks after her parents and enjoys their company. Now there is someone to take good care of her. Along with the love and care she has her own free and private life. She feels content and happy and is not ready to leave it at any cost. That's why she rejects her husband's proposal to come back to him. Karuna feels that she is not ready to sacrifice her independent life for anyone esp. for marriage which needs countless sacrifices. She is now busy in searching her real self which has been masked by her husband.

Karuna, the first of Shobha De's heroines, begins to look at herself with matured detachment half way through her life. Each of her frustrations is taken by her as an occasion for self-evaluation. She honestly admits her adolescent immaturity. She feels sorry without hesitation, for losing her head over the hollowness of the glamour. She outgrows her love of excitement, craze for novelty of experience, eagerness for constant stimulations and high surprises of Mumbai life. She soon understands that she cannot be part of such world full of pretensions, trickeries and treacheries.

Karuna is not apologetic when she concludes that she is not a "wife material". Once she is able to through Krish's mean intentions, she is not broken-hearted. She is neither crazy nor does she helplessly cling to him. She enjoys a sense of relief in finding that Krish cannot be interesting any more. The precipitating factor is the realization that a woman has only herself to turn to. Her faith which she placed on money and social status is substituted by faith in her inner potentials and hard work. Thus after a major reorganization of her priorities in life, she freelances for a while with a theatre group, works as a model coordinator for some time, assists in photograph shoots and does a dozen odd assignments to develop self-sufficiency. She values freedom above the success that money can bring. She realizes that contentment does not come from without.

Towards the end of the novel, Junior Girish, son of a popular producer of TV serials, comes with a proposal to Karuna, on his father's behalf. Karuna reacts with remarkable firmness and clear-sightedness. She expresses her unwillingness to mess up her life with compromises, hypocrisies and illusions and to remain stagnant and useless. She feels that living her life in the way she thinks best is more important than anything else.

The choice to remain single is one more step of Karuna towards self-actualization, because it has been made not out of a dismal sense of helplessness or self reproach or prejudice. It is not even to cover up a sense of failure with artificial gaiety. It is a well thought, deliberate mode of self-expression, autonomy and absence of conflicts. There is more honest than humbug in this choice. She keeps the erotic and the economic as separate realms. Karuna's rejection of marriage is not

necessarily significant for a woman, and her tough talk to the prospective suitor, Ranbir, on this issue shows her preference for mature friendship to unhealthy subjugation. Her condemnation of marriage is motivated by her caution, not to allow a man to image or fashion her identity on a mould of his preference.

It is argued by many commentators that Karuna is merely self-centered in her rebellion and that is "...disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient". But it is to be perceived as her individual act of courage. Whereas De's other women like Reema and Surekha (Snapshots) accept dependency inevitable. In this connection, Karuna's decision to focus on her own needs, resourcefulness and self-actualization can be better understood in terms of her rational self-interest. Freedom is Karuna's choice, in a situation of the productive versus parasitical existence. (Socialite Evenings: 297)

Yet another important self-actualizing characteristic traceable in Karuna is her spontaneity. She comes to terms with herself, on the basis of a self-actualizing orientation of her attitude to life. She decides to go back to her parents and the milieu which she once escaped out of deliberate resentment. She does not choose to live a sealed and vengeful life in the interiors of a pathless forest. Nor does she intend to shirk off the responsibilities of life like a coward. She listens to the genuine inner dictates to revive her connection with her parents and with her pathetic invalid sister. She says that living with her parents has opened up a new dimension of life for her. She enjoys being a responsible and caring daughter for the first time in her life. She wants to show them love and looks forward to being looked by them.

Karuna's feeling while watching the symbolic procession on the day of Ganpati Utsav, speaks volumes of her love to enjoy human togetherness despite her passionate need for freedom. Karuna who finds it a strain to put up with the presumptuous and insinuating socialites maintains a safe distance from them. But she wants very much to identify herself with the poor and innocent people on the beach. From her ability to resolve the dichotomies of life, the situations in which individual versus society, aloneness versus togetherness, detachment versus identification and rebellion versus acceptance persist, it is derivable that Karuna has the unfailing traits of a self-actualizer.

It is only Karuna of all the women in the novel, who learns from life. She is self-centered in her rebellion. Sometimes she seems to be courageous more than any other woman in the novel. Karuna's human-female experience is being dissolved resulting to profitability. She wants success and satisfaction of needs together. As she is asking for her demands to satisfy herself in a male dominated society, it becomes a feminist stance. The woman folk of De neither belong to the liberal feminists nor the radical feminists. The women characters symbolize writer's struggle for artistic self-definition. Socialite Evenings should be regarded as a feminist romance. The women characters of the novel do not rest at one place. They are in dilemma of freedom and marriage. They want to move away from the tradition but something in their mind attaches them with the tradition of marriage. There are no conventional romance elements. Women create their own culture. The technique of narrating one's story itself brings in emphasizing and narrating one's experience. Thus, this first novel of De could be considered as an inauguration of her individual rebellion against patriarchy.

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