



## MAN-WOMAN RELATIONS IN SHOBHA DE'S SOCIALITE EVENINGS

**DR. MIRZA M. BAIG**

Post Graduate Deptt. of English and Research Centre  
People's College, Nanded  
(MS) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Shobha De has to her credit a series of best-selling novels beginning with her maiden creation *Socialite Evenings* (1988) and continuing with *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995) and *Second Thoughts* (1996). Apart from these best-selling novels, De has to her credit the editorship of the popular magazines like *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*. Her works represent the militant phase of feminism in Indian English Writing. Shobha De claims herself to writing "popular fiction", saying that she is "a pioneer" in this field. She also claims to be "among the first to explore the world of the urban woman in India" (Surenren, 1992). Undoubtedly, Shobha De is a talented writer and one comes across some original insights and brilliant strokes in her works. Through her novels, she has attempted to establish the perception of the male as perceived by the female characters in her novels. The image of the woman, created by our myths and legendary stories, is that of a weaker creature who has always been in the custody and supervision of man.*

**Keywords:** male, female, man, woman, domestic, urban, perception

### DISCUSSION:

Mrs. De is concerned with the urban woman, one doesn't take it into consideration that the urban woman would, undoubtedly, be weak. Rather she is an incarnation of liberty, competence and self-sufficiency. She knows how to get the things on her own terms and conditions. The mythical woman and the urban modern woman are contradictory to each other. One is a symbol of idealism whereas the other is that of practicality. Virginia Woolf has put the same as—

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*Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant...Some of the most inspired words, some the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband. (Woolf, 1929, pp. 45-46)*

De's women characters seem to be bold, courageous and ambitious. They seem to have got victory over their families. They seem to use their sexuality as a woman against the male dominance. They, it seems, have minimized the image of man as a dwarf. The world of Shobha De's women seems to be dominated by the females only. It would not be wrong to say that Shobha De has female heroes in her novels.

In such a female dominated scenario, undoubtedly, the males are subsided and are compelled to live a life very much as liked and expected by their dominant counterparts. Taken on the literary side, the critics believe that women had to create a literature of their own, in which the feminine sensibility could consider and confront the peculiarity of feminine issues and experiences. It is essential to do so because a larger part of the feminine experience is out of the reach of the male psyche and, therefore, an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts and traumas, in all their nuances, ambiguities and contradictions, could be achieved only by women writers.

The seventies and the eighties have seen a spurt in feminist writing which colours in its pages the livid rage of the exploited female against the male dominion that characterizes both the Western and Eastern patriarchal cultures. Such works present women as oppressed, exploited, tortured, cheated, angry, alienated and rebellious—mostly sexual promiscuity and lesbianism. But this towering rage against the patriarchal categories and female domination resulted in biased and distorted presentation of man.

Shobha De's fictional world has aroused curiosity and interest on one hand and downright rejection and denunciation on the other. The works of this "high priestess of gossip and innuendo" (Swarup, 1993, p. 9), when first published, evoked hostile reviews. *Socialite Evenings*, for example, has been branded as a "high society potpourri, bland and banal", bristling with orgy-laced parties and "voyeuristic servings of souped-up, four-wheel-driven-sex-in-all-directions" (Jain, 1989, p. 195). Another reviewer found it "choked with listless lust" and criticized its 'witless dialogue" (Sethi, 1991, p. 41). Shobha De's novels indicate the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to defy rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. From her first novel, *Socialite Evenings*, Shobha De has paved the way towards the exact perception of the male characters. The novel



presents Karuna, the heroine, as a prominent Bombay socialite, the book in the form of her memoirs. As the events are revealed, we see the girl from middle-class gets metamorphosis into a star and there are friends-neurotic, man-hungry. Anjali, gorgeous, vivacious, Ritu, who has developed flirting into a fine art and deserts her second husband and prefers to live with an underworld smuggler. Created against these females are the male characters—Si, Abe, Varun, a high-profile editor, Krish, the pretentious adman, whose wife actively helps him in his extramarital affairs, and Girish, the art-film maker. The story rotates round these characters in a predictable way exposing their sexual perversities.

Karuna is born in a dusty clinic in Satara in a remote village in Maharashtra and does not remember much of her childhood except the strict vigilance of her father. He rarely speaks to the children directly. Karuna's mother has always engrossed herself in her domesticity about what to cook for her husband. She rarely gets time as she gives priority to Father. Karuna observes the relationship between her mother and father and ultimately their vigilance upon them:

*Mother was preoccupied with what to cook for Father's dinner. It never mattered what the children's preferences were. It was always him. We never left out of their little world. If not left out entirely, then certainly kept carefully on the fringes. Mother gave Father priority, whether it was at meal times or anytime else. Whatever little time was left over from looking after his needs was then almost absent-mindedly distributed among three of us. Father rarely spoke directly to us. Anything that he wanted said was always routed through Mother except when our transgressions required chastising. The punishment was swift and direct. In retrospect, I would say he wasn't an unkind or cruel man. Whatever he did to us was done in the belief that he was bringing us up right. (De, 1992, p. 12)*

Karuna's analysis of the male, as father, has been aptly perceived in the context of the Indian culture where the husband is everything for a woman.

Karuna's life starts only when they migrate to Bombay because of her father's official transfer. She meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Her whole world changes as Karuna starts dreaming of a career in films and holidays abroad. When she enters the college and gets married to Bunt, a rich businessman, the family accepts him because of his social status. But he is not the right "husband material", discovers Karuna:



*He was just an average Indian husband unexciting, uninspiring, untortured...He wasn't looking for any stimulation either intellectually or emotionally. (p. 130)*

There occurs a sense of dichotomy in the perception of male as perceived by Karuna in relation to her Father and that of her husband. It is Charlie, her friend at college, who creates in her awareness of her sexual identity and it is through Charlie that Karuna has been introduced to the world of modeling. Through modeling and in the company of Anjali, Karuna learns how to spread her wings to go beyond. Karuna's father reacts violently to her modeling profession and at the same time he doesn't like Anjali as her role-model. She is thankful for her father's transfer to Bombay as she is able to get the opportunity to give altogether a different identity to her personality. Karuna observes:

*The move to the big city came just at the right time—for me but not for the rest of the family...we were country bumpkins transplanted for the first time into the impersonality of big city life. (p. 13)*

Karuna's modeling profession provides her with the opportunity to meet with Anjali, her role-model, through whom she wants to enter a new world and also to meet as many men as she could. Karuna thinks about Anjali that "she offered me the opportunity to be everything I ever wanted to be" (p. 15). Anjali's role in this matter is made clear when she provides Karuna an opportunity to travel on her own to Delhi for modeling. The intimacy of this journey brings Karuna closer to Anjali. Anjali begins to come to Karuna's house for which Karuna is, at first, embarrassed and feels ashamed at her middle-class surroundings. It seems that the middle-class women only want to progress in their lives with the help of the men, their wealth and fame. Anjali hooks Abe due to his richness. She doesn't see for his unfaithfulness in any matter. The way in which Anjali acquires Abe is appreciated by Karuna:

*I can only give her the most fulsome praise for achieving what ninety per cent of India's middle class spend two-thirds of their lives trying to achieve—the step up to the glories of the rich and famous. (pp. 36-37)*

The women like Anjali, in Karuna's eye, don't bother to calculate the background of the person whom they want to get married to. Both, Anjali and Abe, belong to altogether different religions and have come together for sexual fulfillment. Anjali, being super star, attracts Abe and Abe's fame and wealth becomes a means for Anjali to accept him. For a woman like Anjali, Abe is a plaything.



So far as Karuna is concerned, she has also accepted the life of being a super star. She has set her destiny and in accordance with it has decided to move ahead in life. She can think beyond men and marriage. For her, career is most important. She regards her achieving of the career as salvation. The friendship between Anjali and Karuna takes a new turn when Anjali finds that an ad-film-maker she herself is interested in is actually attracted to her protégée. On the other hand, Karuna feels disgusted to know that her erstwhile mentor, the role-model, should encourage her to respond to her husband's advances. Actually, Anjali wants to provide her husband a young and ambitious girl like Karuna. But she goes to New York and there she feels a sense of liberty, away from Anjali and even away from the family affairs. On her return, she finds everyone as superficial. She even goes to the extent of breaking her four-year-old engagement to get married with an old college friend with whom she had lost touch with. This is appreciated by one and all on the ground of financial security but Karuna doesn't find her husband motivating in sexual affairs. Karuna says:

*I think our marriage was over the day our awful honey-moon started. We've got nothing going. I don't love you—never have. As for you—I really don't know to this day why you chose to marry me. I don't think you even know who you married. You don't have a clue what sort of woman I am. I'm tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerism, the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into your overall scheme of things—I was another one of your well-calculated deals. (p. 185)*

Karuna's husband treats her as a matter, a mere object subjected to his own will. There is no meaningful communication between the partners. No smiles and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, no queries and questions but silence. Karuna's humorously sarcastic approach to her problems in the patriarchal culture apparently deconstructs the traditional gender hostility used to elaborate the polarities of connubial ties.

In the meantime, she finds her husband inactive and uninviting. Instead of suffering this pang, she takes delight in Krish, a friend to her husband. Karuna undermines male superiority:

*I love this friend of your, and I want to be with him in Venice. There is good chance that I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. May be he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me. In which case it will really be A Death in Venice. You know by now that I'm not the flighty sort. I don't flirt at random like my other friends. I'm steady and grounded. It's the*



*Taurean in me that's surfacing these days. Treat this as a short-term mania that will wear itself out. (p. 186)*

It appears that Karuna has just a formal relationship with her husband. There is a lack of intimacy between the husband and wife. While she is away, Karuna's husband and mother-in-law discovers Krish's letter to her. Her husband also flies to London to "deal with her." Karuna has been helped by her sister in her elopement to London. Karuna feels and Urbashi Barat comments:

*Helped, undoubtedly, by her sister's support this is in fact one of her major discoveries in her journey, that the sisterhood of women exists, and offers much more support than anything that a man can give. (Barat, 2000, p. 126)*

Karuna remains with her lover who allows her a farewell holiday in Venice. While she remains for a short time with Krish in Venice, she realizes and enjoys the interlude with her husband more than her days with Krish. She compares and analyses that there is no real difference between the two men. If her husband is hollow and superficial, so is Krish. Krish is, then, an ironic representation of an ideal, non-patriarchal lover who doesn't dominate the woman but constitutes, rather, a phase through which she must pass before she attains selfhood. Her husband is a compromising and forgiving type of person who is not cruel and merciless individual to throw her away:

*I've thought over the whole thing carefully. I would've thrown you 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'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...you have sinned but I must be generous and forgive you. (p. 184)*

This act of forgiveness on the part of Karuna's husband is an act of his male ego, his assertion of superiority.

Once when Karuna returns to her husband, she feels that her fling with Krish seems to make her marriage more tolerable. She discovers that she is pregnant. So far they had decided to remain childless which has been a symbol of barren relationship. Even she still feels she doesn't want the baby. When she informs about her pregnancy to her husband, he immediately takes the opportunity to tell her that he wants divorce. His attitude is a proof that he has been planning this for a long time. Karuna recalls Krish, at this moment, because



after making love to Karuna, Krish also has mentioned that he wants to marry someone else. For her all men appear to be same as her husband, selfish and mean. Finally, Karuna comes to know that behind her relationship with Krish, there is Krish's wife who has deliberately encouraged his extra-marital affairs. Karuna finds herself all alone in this world. She doesn't have either the man as husband or the man as lover. At such time of need, it is Anjali who comes for her help and rescue her. The abortion takes place and Karuna is made free of her most potent symbol of womanhood. She decides to start life a fresh on her own, staying in PG accommodation and beginning to earn her own living and to search for fulfillment in the theatre. Several times, she is tempted by the past, by Krish and later by her repentant husband. She resists herself. Whatever has taken place with Karuna is a matter of power. Hobbes is not the only to talk about mortals obsessed with a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death. Shobha De also writes:

*Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level...Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone...It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power. 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...When one talks of shakti unleashed, one also remembers the two connotations of shakti—the destructive 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 woman power. (De, 1994, pp. 111-113)*

De's women display a female power play in order to deconstruct the male ego.

*Socialite Evenings* shows the struggle of woman against the predatory male-dominated society. The struggle of these women doesn't show any redemption rather in their frantic struggle to escape male-dominance; they meet with failure and are victimized in one way or the other. The perception of male goes on changing from woman to woman. The modern woman strives to escape and to become liberal from male-domination whereas the traditional woman, like Karuna's mother, prefers the traditional way of life. She suggests Karuna not to think of living a lonely life, devoid of a man. She says—

*A woman cannot live alone. It is not safe. We are here today—but who knows about tomorrow? A woman needs a man's protection. Society can be very*



*cruel...a woman's real place is in her husband's house—not in her parent's—take your time but marry. And marry the right one—that is important...Before we die, we want to see you secure and at peace. (De, 1992, pp. 255-256)*

After the divorce, the betrayed husband comes to her begging her to come back. He also shows his inclination for the remarriage. So far as Karuna is concerned, he has deprived her of financial assistance after the divorce though he had promised to help.

Karuna's decision to be financially independent leads her towards the world of advertisement and television production where she gets a good position and has also learnt all the ways and tricks of flirt. By using all the tricks, she is shown flirting with a married journalist, Ranbir Roy. She starts with a small role in the Hindi version of "Desire Under the Elms". Everything at the place has been disgusting except the presence of the great art film-maker Girish Shridhar in the theatre. Girish appreciates Karuna's role and also offers her a leading role in his drama "Shakuntala." Girish has been a widower with a young son Kunal, with whom he has a loving relationship. He has been known to be one of the angry film-makers. His area of interest has been women's subject. In addition, Karuna and Girish show a lot of cultural affinities and Girish takes it as a good omen that Karuna's mother is also named Shakuntala.

Karuna has not been enthusiastic towards intellectual films rather she prefers modeling to acting. She comes across the gossip columns in 'Hits and Flops' a filmy trade paper run by the hotshot editor Varun. She also reads the news that she has been busy having an affair with both father Girish and his young son Kunal. She feels like drowning herself. She doesn't give attention to any marriage proposal and decides that she must take care for her aged parents as they have been quite alone.

At the same time, Karuna considers Varun's position that he has been a notorious editor for inventing stories and ruining the reputations of those who have come in his way. No doubt, Karuna observes, he is rich enough to send his editors abroad for holidays. Karuna also comes to know that Varun is a homosexual who uses to prefer 'Young chikna boys'. Varun announces an anniversary party as he makes a plan to contest for Rajya Sabha seat. Karuna finds him supporting the policies of the PM so that, at least, the ambassadorship would probably be awarded to him. Varun appears to Karuna's eyes as a good politician that he had a good machinery to buy the votes and win the elections. It doesn't appeal to Karuna anymore.





She decides that she should do something so as to stand by herself in life. Soon after that she graduates and moves from writing to making ad films as she has already won the Ad Club award for the Best Ad of the year. Karuna indulges herself into a relationship with Ranbir Roy, the reporter from the 'Washington Times'. He is a second-generation American reporter a married man with two kids. He invites Karuna to go with him to Washington as an assistant. Karuna observes that Ranbir has an ambition to reach the top in editorship. Ranbir thinks of Karuna as a traditional Indian woman who is wrapped in yards of sari. He tries to involve Karuna in project called 'status of the urban Indian woman'. This effort of Ranbir Roy doesn't invite Karuna to indulge in any intimate relationship. Ranbir suggests Karuna to use her own life story for a documentary on the Indian woman. This suggestion of Ranbir gives Karuna the idea of writing out her life story by herself and so she sits typing before her personal computer.

While studying the male perspective, it is very necessary to consider all the female characters' perception of the male. Anjali, in *Socialite Evenings*, is a major female character who is mainly responsible for directing Karuna to become a limelight. Anjali is a middle-class woman. Her father is a Gujarati doctor. He used to practice in suburban Bombay. Anjali is sent to the New Era School where she learns her 'brand of English with its grammatical lapses' (p. 36). After her education, she joins as an air hostess in Air India where she meets with Abbas Tyabji. She decides to marry Abe, as she calls him, just to escape from her middle-class boredom. The exciting world of money with Abe excites and attracts her. For her, Abe is a source of luxury and economic security. It appears that in Anjali's life sex and money have been prominent. One finds in her circle everyone was thrice married and divorce had been commonplace. This is enough to explain Anjali's marital relationship with her husband, Abe. She is treated like a baby. She desires to get herself indulged in the domestic affairs. Their respective origins hinder in their relationship. For Abe, religion was of no consequence.

There arises a sort of jealousy between Anjali and Karuna due to the reason of their relationship with other males. As Karuna has been new in the elite society, Anjali expects that she should not surpass her (Anjali's) reputation. In the modern elite society in which the novel is set, one who has more extra-marital affairs is believed to be well-known person. Anjali does not find Abe to be an interesting person in the long run of life. She feels bored of him and as Karuna takes over to the ad film maker, Anjali becomes jealous of her. She cannot do as Karuna has done because she cannot divorce her husband, Abe. Out of this marriage, they have a daughter called Mimi (Mumtaz). As Mimi's father, Abe has always played round with all the fashion models including the one who won the Miss India Contest.



Every time Abe wishes to have a different woman and that's what he uses to get. The relationship between Abe and Anjali is very nominal.

Her unsatisfied relationship with her husband takes her towards indulging in an affair with the income-tax official who gets excited by her painted nails. This officer thought her to be exotic and unreachable. Anjali's next affair is with Pierre, the young French instructor at the Alliance. Anjali goes on indulging in affair after affair and entraps Karan, a Punjabi masseur young enough to be her son. At the death of her father, Anjali feels ashamed of her own existence. She feels embarrassed thinking herself to be a blot in the family name. She finds every man hungry of physical satisfaction and trying to exploit the women as and when they get the chance.

Another affair of Anjali is with Kumar Bhandari, a businessman with a factory exporting machine tools. He has two wives—one each at Madras and at Juhu. Anjali has become his third wife. With all the exigencies of luxuriousness, the marriage takes place. Within a short period, Anjali comes to realize that Kumar has been a gay and a homo with Murthy, an orphan whom Kumar had picked up somewhere. Anjali explains to Karuna about Murthy that he is cute like Sabu the Elephant Boy and is great for Kumar's ego. Kumar even gives jewellery, cuff-links and rings to Murthy and bought him National Savings Certificates for future security. Anjali has nothing left except attending parties and performing pujas. This attitude of Anjali makes her to believe and arrange for a sexy Sanysi whom they call as Babaji. So far as Babaji is concerned, Anjali's perception regarding the male is totally changed. For her, Babaji is a 'Sufi Saint' and 'the incarnation of Gautam Budha and the final avatar of Krishna. Along with Mataji, Babaji performs the act of religious consolation for the people though later he is arrested for smuggling gold in this country. Except Babaji, every other male appear to Anjali as bait which she can consume to satisfy her sexual hunger.

Another female character who perceives male is Ritu, the friend to Karuna. Karuna suggests Ritu to join the Sisters of Charity, or to organize an anti-sati cell in her locality just to remove her sense of boredom. By and by she may be able to serve for the women's issues. But Ritu soon finds excitement with Gul, the builder, a don and a smuggler, whom she has met at the party the Patels have given. Ritu decides to go for a 'trail marriage' with Gul. Orgasm seems to be the only thing that matters in marriage. So, Ritu loves the thrashings she receives from her husband because they lead to terrific orgasms. She finds herself totally engrossed in Gul. She begins to speak the same language which the promiscuous women use in the novel:

*Gul is the best thing that could've happened to me. (p. 206)*



During this trial, she comes to notice many facts of Gul's personality that he has been associated with the underworld. Further, Ritu finds herself caught up in a typical situation with her latest lover. Ritu had to procure virgins for Gul. Fade up with all this, Ritu attempts to commit suicide the next day after Anjali's anniversary party but she is rescued by Gul and his friends.

## CONCLUSION:

Shobha De has attempted very artistically to bring forth the relationship between man and woman in *Socialite Evenings*. It is her conception that man and woman are like the two wheels of a vehicle, if one does not work properly, the other is bound to stop working. In a sense, the couple has always to have cordial relations so as to let the life go smoothly.

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