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Eroticism and Rebelliousness in Modern Indian Woman: A Psychological Analysis of Shobha De's *Socialite Evening*

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The modern Indian writers who write in English especially female novelists such as Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale and Shobha De are pre-occupied with the changing socio-cultural scenario of Indian life in which the new born Indian woman is emerging like Phoenix out of the ashes of her former self. She is giving voice to her deepest emotions and thoughts, and without reservation or fear expressing her erotic desires explicitly sending shock waves in social and literary circles. The female protagonist of Shobha De is strong-willed, fiercely independent, sexually outspoken and bold, uncompromising, and having a clear vision and aim in life. The feminine characters of Shobha De are decidedly urban, polished and educated, and unlike the rural women and the conservative middle class women, they do not follow the dictates of tradition or convention. The new image of women which Shobha De has portrayed in her novels present them as ambitious, lustful, power hungry and bold who use sex as weapon to win and mould men to their viewpoint and get the better of them. This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations or divorce are no longer considered to be a taboo. The concept of ideal Indian woman has become out-dated. A modern woman is career-oriented because she knows that it is her economic dependence which empowers a male to dominate his wife and subject her to physical, mental torture. A metamorphosis from a silent sufferer to relentless rebel has taken place in the attitude and psyche of modern Indian women who face social criticism with contempt and indifference, but always stick to their own viewpoint and decide accordingly, so that, they emerge more wise and mature than before by their experience.

Motif of Transformation: Shobha De's *Socialite Evening* is a novel about the journey of prominent Bombay socialite Karuna from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman and the book is in the form of her memoirs. Like James Joyce's *Ulysses* it is a saga of suffering and experience, excitement and adventure which unfold in her life as she paves her way through the glitter and glamour of Bombay's Fashion and film world. Karuna who is born in a dusty clinic in **Satara**, a remote village in Maharashtra migrates to Bombay because of her father's official transfer. When she meets Anjali, a fashionable and sophisticated woman having connections in the film and fashion world her whole world changes and she starts dreaming of a career in modeling and film. Anjali, with her satiny polished nails, French perfumes and silver grey Impala make a stunning impact on the mind of Karuna who decides to follow in her footsteps. Karuna rebels against her overbearing and dominating father who considers her more of a problem child than a daughter. She even refuses to listen to her mother

1

who disapproves her growing intimacy with Anjali. The house of Anjali is a regular haunt for pleasure-seeking actresses and models who indulge in sexual orgies, booze and smoke. Karuna is introduced to a world of glamour and pleasure which she has never known before, and it is an attraction which she cannot resist or ignore. Anjali who believes in sexual promiscuity suggest Karuna to enjoy with a middle-aged ad-film maker but the idea initially sounds disgusting to Karuna. Later, however, Karuna established physical relations with ad-film maker in London and gets a taste of the free and luxurious life of the West. Karuna realizes the importance of sex and money in a woman's life but her hasty marriage to a rich man proves disastrous. A well-planned marriage can provide social and economic security to a woman but seldom provides conjugal and emotional satisfaction for husbands cease to take interest in their wives after some time. They get pre-occupied with their work or business and get attracted to other women. Moreover, they expect the wives to feel grateful for getting economic security and social recognition in life. It is sexual and emotional frustration which turns the wives against their husbands they "were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized". The marriage was "you don't really count except in the context of my priorities. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our head and four square meals a day". (p.69). Karuna makes an attempt to play the role of a "well-trained, Indian wife", but is unable to gain the attention and love of her husband who remains pre-occupied with his business. The idle mind of Karuna indulges in erotic fantasies and she remembers the orgies at Anjali's house.

Extra-Marital Affair: the conventional Indian woman seldom voiced her sexual and emotional needs and remained totally at the mercy of her husband for physical gratification. It was considered improper and outrageous for a woman to express her erotic desires and she was looked down upon as being 'low and promiscuous' if she dared to do so. The feminine protagonists of Shobha De are not only concerned with their physical needs but also with the right to seek their gratification. No matter what the cost or censure, they must seek some understanding male and fulfill their carnal desires. Obviously Shobha De upholds and believes in the theory of 'libidinal desires' of Freud and understands the importance of sex in human life. Unable to cope with her famished sexuality boredom Karuna establishes amorous relationship with Krish who is a married man and an intimate friend of her husband. Krish is a womanizer and a confirmed rake. This extra-marital affair is exposed somehow and Karuna's husband comes to know of it. Karuna suffers no guilt or remorse for her adultery. In the beginning he is full of indignation and rage, but finding Karuna unperturbed and remorseless and even planning to go to Rome with Krish on a holiday, he softens his stance and assumes a compromising attitude. It is because his self-esteem, male-ego and social prestige is at stake. He evinces large-heartedness and a forgiving attitude when he says,

"I have 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)

Adultery and fornication which are considered to be cardinal sins in conservative society and religion no longer prick the conscience of modern woman who considers it rightful to give an outlet to her repressed sexual and emotion needs. This explains why the female protagonists of Shobha De are sexually bold and assertive to the degree of becoming lewd and low in general assessment. Marriage tends to restrict and ethically define the sexuality of a woman. A modern woman however understands the importance of erotic fulfillment in life and can have traces of nymphomania as in the character of Anjali who after divorcing Abe her husband marries Kumar Bhandari, a rich man. Later, she hooks a teenager for sexual pleasure and fulfillment.

Crisis: The female protagonists of Shobha De face hardships and obstacles primarily because they are ambitious and have a vision in life, and their sense of individuality makes them adamant and uncompromising. The predicament of Karuna began when she shed off her middle class mentality and went against the wishes of her parents to become a model. Her unsuccessful marriage and temporary affairs provide her with an insight and understanding about male psychology and social reality. She realizes the importance of determining her own priorities even though it creates problems for her. On her own part she tries to be accommodating and understanding which is quite typical in an Indian woman despite her modernity. However, when she becomes pregnant and the legitimacy of the child is doubted by her husband, it gives birth to a major crisis in her life which proves a turning point in her life. She is filled with righteous indignation and revolts against her husband who sues her for divorce. Karuna decides to abort the foetus and Anjali provides the much needed moral support and advice. Karuna's father scorns and rebuffs her and tells her to pray the price of her own doings. Instead of demoralizing and depressing her. This crisis helps karuna in becoming more determined to face the challenges of life. She is an advanced version of Gauri, the female protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's celebrated novel **Gauri**. Like Gauri, Karuna decides to re-shape her destiny and life according to her own vision and experience.

Maturity: After having impartial view of everything that has happened to her, Karuna is able to come to a mature independent decision about the future course of action in life. She takes a PG accommodation and begins to earn her own living and seeks aesthetic and emotional fulfillment in the theatre. She is tempted to revert back to her former life first by Krish who wants to re-establish sexual intimacy with her and later by Kumar Bhandari who wants to re-marry her in order fill the void in his life. She detests her husband's hypocrisy, deviousness and flattering nature and knows that such marriage would remain meaningless and loveless. Relationship with Krish too shall not advance beyond physical closeness. She turns down Kumar Bhandari's offer because it is ill-timed and ineffective for Karuna who went through the protracted pangs of an abortion. She also comes to know about his relations with a woman named Winnie. She tells him contemptuously,

"you are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie.
I hope she's got a wax doll of yours. I'll send her some extra pins to
stick into it" (p.264)

By rejecting Krish and Kumar Bhandari Karuna defies the pre-conceptions, practices and presumptions of a phallogentric patriarchal society- a world poles apart from her own rationale of life. Karuna realizes that male dominance in a patriarchal society occurs due to two reasons namely (a) the passivity and dependence of women on men for shelter, support and security, (b) economic dependence in case of unemployment of the spouse who becomes a target of slander and abuse. Marriage subjugates and enslaves a woman who becomes a plaything in the hands of her husband. He bullies, criticizes and often beats her which crushes her self-confidence and courage. As a daughter and later as a wife Karuna has had a suffocating experience of male dominance. She decides to become a free-lance writer and give expression to her creativity and subjective experience. She turns down Girish Sridhar's marriage offer despite the fact that he is a reputed art film maker. Despite her rejection of his offer Karuna becomes an object of ridicule and slander in the columns of a filmy trade paper. Her mother attributes her predicament to her unmarried status which invites all sorts of slander and rumour-mongering. She offers her motherly advice,

“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 parents. Take your time but marry. And marry the right one- that is important..... before we die, we want to see secure and at peace.” (p.p. 275-76)

Karuna has learnt from experience that survival in a metropolitan city like Bombay depends more on plentitude of money than on a man. She reasons with her mother,

“But, mother why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much money as any man, I have roof over my head.... I am at peace with myself. I'm not answerable to anyone”..... (p.276)

The female protagonists of Shobha De have a very strong sense of pragmatic reality and have an existential awareness of life. This outlook develops gradually when they face crises in personal and professional life. They are not only self-critical and introspective but also objective and discerning. The heroines of Shobha De highlight the changing socio-cultural scenario of Indian urban society where an educated woman demands an equal right to enjoy all good things of life which includes erotic satisfaction and sensual fulfillment. She expresses her sexual desires and preferences without any sense of shame and guilt and refuse to be a passive sex partner for a male. This transition from modesty and reticence to free expression and boldness has projected the protagonists of Shobha De as 'rebelleions' who seem to shatter the culturally-strong Indian social fabric and unleash an era of sexual corruption and promiscuity.

4

Much of Shobha De's unkind criticism is based on this account. However, despite the revolt and rebellion of these protagonists, the essential Indian feminine element and values remain intact in them and they seldom lose their goodness or sensitivity completely.

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5