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A Woman's Cry for Love, Desire and Existence: A Study of Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*

Pratibha Patel

Research Scholar

Department of English

Banaras Hindu University

Varanasi- 221005

Abstract:

Shobha De heralds a new wave of thinking about the images of women in the present scenario. She is expressive enough while concentrating on shifting images of women with new perspective and outlook in the contemporary societal setup. The women in all her novels try to shatter the patriarchal hierarchy and hegemony to achieve the state of liberation in every steps of life against male dominance. On the contrary her novel '*Second Thoughts*' is quite different for her treatment of the female character. In the novel, De has presented the anxiety of a newly married girl who is deprived of personal care, tenderness, affection, emotional expressions and the most important her identity. The aim of the present paper is to bring forward the complexities and the agony of a modern woman who despite of being well educated and modern enough feels the lack of compatibility within the marriage. She longs for her true self. Her sense of freedom, love and desire comes in to nothing in the present scenario. The feel of utter loneliness surrounds her and she cries for her identity out of just being a household woman.

The major findings of the present paper include the followings:

The paper will chiefly analyze how a high-spirited woman faces despair, lack of affection and inconsistency within marriage and her constant search for true companionship. Second, my sole concern is to show how a woman tries to find her way out of the marriage to enjoy the freelance of life. Third, the chief focus of the paper will be on to show how in the new era of modernity the long-established concept of marriage is on the verge of transformation.

Keywords: Existence, Scenario, Companionship, Agony, Despair, Longing, Tradition and Modernity

Tradition and morality seems to play a major role when it comes to define the images of a woman in the present scenario of women's fiction writing in English. Most of the eminent female writers have put their opinion regarding the images of women who have played the role of modern woman beyond paying attention towards the morality and traditional values as well as the society based customs. Shobha De, a highly acclaimed journalist cum postmodern Indian women fiction writer keeps a distinct place among the literary figures who have openly dealt with the major issues related to the images of women. From '*Socialite Evenings*' (1989) to '*Second Thoughts*' (1996) De has presented different shades of women's character who had lived their lives according to their passion and desire at large. De has concentrated on the lives of women protagonists who have accepted the new pattern of life style by rejecting the conventions and customs prescribed by the society since ancient India. De feels that the highly educated

modern women in present Indian society want change in their concept of life towards family and society. According to A. Purnachandra Rao:

“Shobha De depicts modern, educated, career-oriented upper class women who are sensitive to changing times and situations. Her women are aware of cultural shorts comings to which they are subjected in this patriarchal society. They rebel against their men seeking considerable identity and unlimited freedom. They are trapped in a conflict between personal aspirations and social demands.”⁶ (Rao, 20)

The women in her fictions are completely conscious of patriarchal shortcomings in which they are subjected to by the society. In order to overcome with these situations they try to rebel against their men in quest of substantial identity and unrestricted autonomy. The women not merely challenge the patriarchy and find solace but also reject to be labeled as things of indulgence. Pratibha Gupta in her article, “A Social Semiotic Study of Shobha De’s Narratives” observes:

De’s style depicts new women in a mood of revolt. It undermines the old mythologies of gender relationships by questioning and revising them. They are challenging the stereotypes, fairy tales, traditions and histories that are prescribed plots of their lives and estimates their authority and power. She is now like a released, long blocked river sweeping away everything coming her way. And very often it has devastating effect on the society.”³ (Verma &sharma, 35)

Shobha De’s seventh novel ‘*Second Thoughts*’ (1996) also bears the same theme of a woman’s desire and need of freedom but the woman protagonist of the novel is different from her other women characters. The sole aim of the paper is to present the state of utter loneliness of an educated middleclass girl whose married life remained only as a tool to complete the familial responsibilities. She fails to achieve the state of happiness as one desire to find after her marriage. Secondly my paper will show that how a girl being neglected by her husband seeks another source of pleasure and freedom out of her marriage by keeping an extra-marriage relationship. The present novel deals with the role of a middle class girl ‘Maya’ from ‘Calcutta’ whose life shatters after her marriage to ‘Ranjan’ a man of different values. ‘Maya’ an attractive girl whose skin tone was not very much fair but “Maya liked her skin tone-a warm, rich golden brown, like sunlight dancing on Hooghly, that offset her gleaming jet-black hair and large, dark eyes to advantage....and never mind the complexion. A few shades here or there didn’t make any difference, not to her”. (*Second Thoughts*, 5) She is a girl of absolute fascination about her dream of ‘becoming a journalist and changing the world. (156)

The centre of the novel denotes the agony of Maya who is “eager to escape her dull, middle – class home in Kolkatta and plunge in to the whirl of Mumbai, where she moves after her marriage”⁴.(Gupta,193) Bearing a degree in textile designing Maya is mindful enough to her potential to work even after marriage. She is full of life enough and wants to enjoy every aspect of life even after her marriage, “high spirited, energetic, bouncy young girl ready to meet life’s

several challenges head-on. (6) She questions her mother's decision on arranged marriage "An arranged marriage? For me? Don't be ridiculous. Besides, I have one more year to go before I finished college," Maya remembered protesting just two months earlier". (3) Again Maya says- "Calm down, Ma. It's not as if whoever-he-is is the last eligible bachelor left on earth. And neither am I a hundred-year-old spinster." (4)

The novel primarily deals with the matrimonial relationship between Maya and Ranjan her husband a foreign return bank employee in Mumbai with his handsome salary. She got her marriage arranged with Ranjan. Before her marriage she was so much fascinated with the life of the city like Bombay. She says, "I'm just dying to go to Bombay." (4) For Maya "marring Ranjan was like marring Bombay. I thought I was the luckiest girl in my locality...I was the one who had bagged a foreign-educated, Bombay-based bridegroom." (215) Maya in the beginning of her married life proves herself a good house wife but soon she realizes the triviality of her marriage and the narrow-mindedness of her husband Ranjan who was against of working of a woman outside of the house.

True, that is the modern trend. But in my case, I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman's duty to run a good home.' And then, turning directly to Maya, he asked in a challenging sort of voice, 'would you agree with that?' (11-12)

Her desire for freedom and glamorous life in Bombay city fills with dryness. Maya expresses her desire:

I wanted the city to sleep in to me slowly. I wanted to absorb it, digest it, make it a part of my system. I wanted desperately to become a Bombaywali. I wanted to belong. (30)

Maya's husband's attitude towards her was very much cold. He didn't like her wife to enjoy the modernity of the Bombay city. He was very conservative and narrow-minded man. He says to Maya, "Women like you- gullible outsiders- are so easily tricked. Remember this is Bombay...you can't trust anybody. Nobody at all. Understand?" (32) Ranjan was the man of insensitivity and incivility. Being a conservative enough there was always an inevitable conflict in his mind. He does not consider Maya's working and exploring the modernity of the city Bombay. Once he says to Maya:

Sometimes you talk like such a kid. Life is not a picnic, you know. And you are not in Bombay on a holiday. As a married woman, you have to learn to deal with responsibilities... In our families the only sort of work ladies do is social work. Our relatives might criticize us if you suddenly take up a job. It's not done. They might think I don't earn enough. (29-31)

As soon as Maya came to know the insensitivity of her husband towards her the fantasy related to her married life turned in to the agony. Soon Maya realized that her husband is not loving and

dutiful towards her and is not able to please her emotionally as well as physically. Maya didn't feel any intimacy in her relationship. Maya realizes that Ranjan has married her only to please and satisfy his mother. Maya says, "He had married me to satisfy his mother. Or maybe something within him...I didn't really feel a sense of belonging." (275-76) She broods over her own situation in the state of utter loneliness that "this wasn't at all what married life was meant to be." (281) Maya's all the excitement towards her husband lost when she bashfully snuggles up to him and tries to make love "but Ranjan had recoiled- jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He had lain trembling in bed for a long time, his breathing heavily, his eyes screwed shut." (283) The very strange behavior of Ranjan forced Maya to ask him, "why are you moving away from me? Don't you like me? Do you hate my body...or just me?" (285)

In their married life there was not only the lack of love and affection but mutual understanding and compatibility was also lacking. The only task remained in Maya's life was to let herself busy in kitchen and hide all her feelings which had become symbolic of her refuge. After being treated like this Maya started feeling denied and says, "It was a gesture devoid of any passion. An impersonal friendly sort of gesture which always left me lacking like a well-trained dog being rewarded for his good behavior." (275) Maya was restless of being treated only as a pet. She assumes her status in her family as useless. Her state of agony and loneliness realizes her that:

I had never felt so useless. Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belong to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own." (292)

Maya was so disappointed for her existence in her own family not more than a house holder, who keeps herself busy in domestic chores and meeting with vendors who come to her house. She says:

Perhaps the only human beings to whose lives I made even the slightest difference were the freelance domestics who came to ensure my house was clean, the pots and pans in the kitchen gleaming and the clothes properly washed. It was these people and the few vendors who came to the building...who made me feel wanted. As if I was in some way relevant to their lives. (292)

Maya's crippled loneliness and depression of being deprived of love, care and respect started questioning her existence in the family. She expresses her feeling to Ranjan, "I've been so lonely...all alone in a city that isn't mine. In a house I don't still feel I belong to." (285) Ranjan's notion towards Maya's existence was derogatory and harsh. He was "practically non-existent" (282) He says to Maya in a rude tone, "How can any intelligent person be lonely? In a city like Bombay at that? There's music. Television. You can read, clean the house, write to your parents. Do something creative. What's the point of complaining all the time?" (32) Maya's situation was like a puppet that has been taunted in each and every time by Ranjan. Her freedom was being restrained by Ranjan. He didn't like Maya to talk to any other woman of Bombay. Maya expresses her feeling in a very heartbreaking manner, "This was a completely different Ranjan

from the one I knew...he would assume his characteristic scowl and glum expression. If I tried to make light conversation, often apeing the women at the party, he would turn to me with puzzled eyes which said, 'What's wrong with you now?' (172-73)

Maya was always being compared with Ranjan's mother and this led Maya in to emptiness within. Her longings to be herself and love by Ranjan broke her in to pieces and utter despair. She expresses her agony and state of emptiness:

At that moment, just about everything seemed wrong with my life- all the choices I'd ever made. My marriage, my decision to move to Bombay, my cowardice at not asserting myself via-a-vis Ranjan, my giving up a career. (188)

Again she pain fully realizes:

Now here we were, locked together in a relationship that didn't satisfy either of us. He very obviously longed to be on his own, leading the life he had become so accustomed to as a student, and then as a promising bank executive living by himself. And I longed for the perfect romantic companion. (276)

Maya's life became dull and boring by the passive attitude of her husband. Soon Maya felt exhausted with the family responsibilities and her barren relationship with Ranjan , 'I have nobody else to talk to all day. I'm so lonely' (32) and she started exploring the new waves of desire to live however sinful it might be. She gets herself ready to establish an extra-marital relation with Nikhil her college time friend in whose company Maya finds all the pleasure and freedom that was lacking in her married life. According to Bijay Kumar Das:

Within the frame work of her novels, Shobha De depicts the breaking up the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In such situation men and women merely becomes partners in love. Economic freedom, promiscuity and uncontrolled passion resulting from 'the lust of the blood' make most men and women vulnerable and the resultant frustration in life engulfs them.² (Das, 86)

Shobha De has presented the male who has the gray shades of passiveness and dry nature but Maya played a counter role by "without caring the morality associated with the wifely devotion, breaks the moral code and establishes post-marital relation with Nikhil."⁵ (Kumar, 130) In the company of Nikhil she felt the passion to live life, enjoyed the freedom of being herself, being a woman of her own choice and achieved the state of poise after being loved by Nikhil. Maya tries to fill the gap of her life in the company of Nikhil. She feels herself very much relax and far away from the gray shades of her life 'the married life' she expresses her state of ease:

Nikhil's image formed in my mind (it took a while forming since I was busy chasing it away), I felt a strange relaxation

come over me...it took me some time to get it to blink...smile...relax and talk to me playfully...I laughed so much, my body shook with unleashed, unexpected, unfamiliar mirth. (35-36)

Maya felt so much liberated, lively, reckless and barmy in the company of Nikhil that she forgot the sense of guilt done by her by betraying her husband. She assumes that, "I reasoned with myself, I wasn't doing anything sinful or wrong." (193) Again she thinks that, "Ranjan had pledge nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and four square meals a day." (288) but it was Nikhil who made Maya laugh with the free waves of life. She says, "I didn't care who saw him there or what the consequences would be for me later. I didn't care if at that moment Ranjan had walked in to the house [or] my mother-in-law herself chose to arrive right then. I would deal with it. But first, I would jerk my neglected mixi to life and get it going." (184-85) She enjoyed the life's best part with the love of Nikhil. She expresses her feeling in the state of excitement, "Maybe I was going crazy. I didn't want to think of consequences. I refused to assume responsibility. I really didn't care one way or the other. I felt free. Lunatic. Wonderful." (293-94)

Maya's life was running smoothly with the company of Nikhil but soon she came to about Nikhil's engagement with a girl of his age and soon she realized her entry in to the 'area of darkness' the news shocked her completely, she stands at her door, "motionless and unthinking" (315) and realizes the futility of present life more useless than before and soon after she decided to make herself ready to endure the pain of her utter loneliness by rebuilding her life with Ranjan. She says, "My entire body was shaking with mirth. The more I stared at the spilled soup, the funnier I found it. I knew I would have to make it again from scratch." (316) According to A. Purnachandra Rao:

Most of Shobha De's women violate the norms prevalent in the institution of marriage as they consider it a way to subjugation. They find their life empty and meaningless. They hold the view that liberation from the shackles of marriage is a mean of emancipation for themselves.³ (Rao, 20)

Conclusion:

Towards the conclusion it is made quite clear that Shobha De has depicted the painful situation of a married woman who suffers a lot within the hollowness of her married life. Her cry for true companionship as well as her desire for freedom and glamorous life remains unheard by her husband as well as her in-laws. Shobha De has exclusively presented the state of a woman who tries to be herself, desires to live, enjoys the freedom but pain is there to be endured.

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