

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

Quest for Identity by Calling – Off Marital Bond (Attitude of Karuna in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*)

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Article History: Submitted-26/05/2017, Revised-19/06/2017, Accepted-22/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

Feminism is a movement which advocates granting the same political, social and economic rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Women's efforts to seek their independence and self – identity start a revolution all over the world which is termed as "Feminism". Karuna, a modern representative of Shobha De in *Socialite Evenings*, strives to seek an identity and satisfaction in her marital life. As she is failed to be satisfied and fulfilled in her marriage life, she calls off marriage to gain her self – identity. The quest for identity is gaining a significant framework in the twentieth century novels. Shobha De is an acute feminist writer. She projects her female protagonists with a perception that it will question the patriarchal hegemony of our society.

Keywords: quest for identity, marriage, feminism.

The crisis of identity has always enjoyed a defining significance in the thematic framework of the Indo-Anglican novels. The novels of Shobha design the techno – thematic fabric of Indian English fiction and lay the foundation of the new Indian English fiction. The post – colonial age represented by Shobha De is chiefly a quest for identity along different dimensions of socio – political and economic order of India. The novels of Shobha De explore the thick congested fabric of Indian life and structure her fiction with unquestionable authority. The crisis of identity plays vital role in the cast of the narrative of De. Her novels explore the hidden dimensions of human psyche along socio – economic and cultural dimension.

It is pertinent to note that marriage in Indian customs and traditions is a religious, ritualistic process solemnized in a dignified manner in the presence of august gathering of relatives and friends. Sacred vows and promises on the part of the groom and bride are taken, blessed with chanting of holy mantra. It marks the beginning of the new life for the young couple highly regarded as a holy union. The traditional shastras and long standing ethics glorify marriage, by assigning new roles to the wedded couple in the existing setup of the societies.

Marriages 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 channels, without, at the same time suppressing sex. (Bijay Kumar Das, 209)

It is generally said that marriages are settled in heaven and performed on the earth. Through marriage, both husband and wife find fulfilment and bliss, while society even looks at it with equal respect and is held high. In De's novels, treatment of marriage is unlike what persons and society thinks of. The institution of marriage and the family life are under tremendous pressure in her novels. Yet Shobha De must not be held blamed for the picture of marriage she portrays in her novels.

Shobha De's feminism is within the limits of her perceptions towards the projection of the matured women. She portrays more mature women in comparison to their male counterparts in her novels. Her women establish relationship with their male partners according to their own terms and conditions. She hates those men who are passive in nature and response towards women. Even though women are marginalized in the traditional set – up of Indian society, the maturity of women has been proved before the male dominated Indian world in De's novels.

The experience of Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* is the experience of a large number of Indian women who bound to live in patriarchal setup of society. Indian women are made to listen and tolerate each and everything of the male chauvinistic society. They bear the burden all the time. They have to tolerate the whims of their husbands and feel the emotional exploitation by their own children. But men in the fiction of Shobha De are secondary because of her own sense of feminism. They are totally threatened by their own female partners.

In *Socialite Evenings*, the life of Karuna is quite devotional, submissive towards her passive and docile husband but there is no question of love between them. In her relationship with her husband, Shobha De attempts to portray her feminine characteristics. There is complete emotional void between Karuna and her husband. There is a sense of emotional bankruptcy between them. The proper understanding as is expected between the husband and the wife is lacking in the marital relationship of Karuna and her Husband. Due to the indifferent attitudes and behaviour of the husband towards her, Karuna thinks that she has wedded the wrong man at the wrong time. She feels that her husband is an average Indian husband unexciting, uninspiring and untutored.

Karuna is marginalized at the hands of her husband. She hates the lifeless and callous attitude of the husband. They keep monotonous activities in their routine life. She acknowledges the confinement of women with roof over her head and four square meals a day with regret. Karuna's husband is an incompetent and inadequate person who does not possess qualities of an ideal husband. He turns to several defence mechanisms when he realizes the loss of dominance and control over his self – affirming wife. He exhibits his male chauvinism and power – assertion through inflicting atrocities upon his wife. It is his self – conceit and ego, which retreats him from free exchange of views with his wife.

Karuna is a Hindu housewife, conservative and traditional who does not protest but faithfully obeys her husband and maintains everything at home well. On the contrary her husband without giving her freedom that she desires for treats her as a mere object. It is pertinent to note that the reasons for development of rifts between husband and wife relationship in this novel are varied. Karuna always finds faults with her husband, his reading of 'Times of India', his horrible Safari Suits, his chewing of gum and manner of compulsive socializing, etc. Her restlessness lies in her self – experience that her husband does not understand her feelings and emotions and does not care for her being, her personality and her inspirations.

Karuna feels that she is a well trained Indian wife. She asserts that she is not a toy of a man. Karuna is frustrated with lack of fulfilment, irresponsible attitude and absence of meaningful communication between them. The realization that a fragile and futile marital knot does not provide satisfaction disturbs her quite often. Their relations are emotionally dry and silence prevails between them as they co – exist. There is no smile and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, no queries and questions between them.

To resist her lifeless marital relationship with her husband, Karuna establishes an affair with another man Girish. She considers this act as sin in the beginning. She starts to accommodate in new circumstances gradually. She does not have any hesitation to express her interest on the other man even to her husband. She revenges her husband by exploiting his passiveness. On the other hand, she does not mind to keep even a formal relationship with her husband. She does not hesitate to declare her intention to sit in the laps of other man,

I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him in Venice. There is a good chance that I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. Maybe he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me. In which case it will really be *A Death in Venice*. (SE, 186)

Karuna's past suffering due to the passiveness and exploitation by her husband changes her attitude. Her sarcastic approach to her problems in the patriarchal male culture apparently deconstructs the traditional gender hostility used to elaborate the polarities of connubial ties. She decides to react against male – superiority. She expresses her urge through illicit love,

You know by now that I am not the flighty sort. I don't flirt at random like my other friends. I am 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. (SE, 186)

Karuna plays different roles like a modern woman in the fast changing society. She is a successful model but she is an unsuccessful housewife. She thinks that marriage subjugates woman. She has independent thought. She develops her own life style on own ego, which are necessary for the survival of her identity and dignity. She is not slavishly tagged to tradition. De transforms Karuna into a creative principle of art and beauty.

According to traditional setup of mind women are regarded as the symbol of passivity. If women become active, the activeness of men is drowned. Helen Cixous observes rightly,

A male privilege can be seen in the opposition between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity. Either the woman is passive, or she does not exist. What is left unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the opposition, she is not coupled with the father who is coupled with the son. (Helen Cixous, 288)

Shobha De beautifully presents the effect of unhealthy relationship between the husband and the wife in this novel. Marriage has been taken different perspectives in her novel. Marriage is not made in heaven as the traditional people conceive. Modern people regard marriage is only a sort of economic bond of living. A woman in Indian society marries not just the man but also with his entire family and entire responsibilities. She loses her freedom, free – wandering and free – thoughts after she is married. Karuna also suffers the same lost in her marriage. But she revolts it in her course of life. She is the representative of De's new women and that is why detests her husband's flattering nature, her duplicity and deviousness. She remarks about the changing attitude of Indian women in these words,

I felt like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motions of house – keeping and playing wife but the resentment and rebellion remained just under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation. (SE, 69)

Alexander Walker has assigned great significance to marriage. He is of view that it is marriage which separates human beings from that of animals. There is no question of marriage in the world of animals. The journey of animals is free from taboos. Animals enjoy and fulfil their physical compulsions without any sense of morality. They are not attached to each other as the human beings are attached through marriage. Marriage is the intermingling of two emotions, two souls and two minds. David McReynolds writes critically, "Nor can a person find his identity in the family – for that institution is breaking up" (David McReynolds, 203).

Karuna is interested to end her marriage. She leaves India and goes to London in order to spend some time with Krish. Her affair with Krish is exposed to her husband in London. Her husband suddenly lands there to thrash things out with her. She does not only feel ashamed of the betrayal against her husband, but adopts a fabricated stance about her intended trip to Rome also. Her husband shows his politeness and prepares herself to forget everything.

Karuna feels completely drawn to Krish. She is happy as she finds someone who has tried to understand her. She rediscovers her 'self' in Krish's company. This new found ecstasy and positive attitude had a psychological basis. In other words, she ideally sees herself as a human being with freedom, liberty of choice and individual identity, but in fact, she finds herself cowed down by various socio-economic variables. This disparity between

her self-concept and reality produce anxiety in her. In order to reduce this anxiety she adopts various psychological defences by distortion or denial.

Karuna is not a sex maniac; she does not find her own marriage very meaningful. She is utterly dissatisfied with her married life which lacks mutual trust and compatibility and she is in search of something fulfilling. This quest for fulfillment refers to her need for self-esteem. She has fulfilled her lower level needs for material things in her rich husband's home. Now it is the quest for self-esteem that bothers her.

The feminist novel *Socialite Evening* asks many questions regarding marriage and family. Her female characters struggle against the predatory male dominated society. But it is believed in the Indian society that the security of a woman lies in the hands of a man. But Karuna is against this thought. She asks her mother when her mother advocates the marriage to confer security and peace in life,

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 a roof over my head. I don't have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I'm not answerable to anyone... I can't make any sacrifices – not now. (SE, 276)

Hence Karuna wants to be a liberated woman. She does not want to make her life more complicated by involving in marital life again. She feels contented in being alone. Due to unhappy and dissatisfied result of her marriage, she decides to have no more man in the name of husband in her life. Karuna decides married life as a disharmony one on the whole.

Karuna refuses a good life offered by Girish or Ranbir if it entails a loss of individuality. She realizes that sexually appealing playboys like Krish actually live off their doting women – patrons. Her resistance to the idea of marriage is also significant. She prefers a friendship to permanent subjugation. She refuses the institutionalising of her personality and her stereo – typification within marriage. She also refuses to allow others to fashion an identity for her. This is seen in her rejection of Ranbir's proposal to make a documentary. This refusal to allow the imaging of her life by others is the creation of space where she possesses the freedom to write her own self. Karuna is here reversing the standard pattern. She is writing the identity of the men in her lives while projecting her point of view. De has thus finds a way for the heroine to re-write literally, the gender equations in a manner she chooses.

Karuna has been mauled by the patriarchal society. It is difficult for her to accept or reject this indelible feature of her life. The only way she can come to terms with it is to write about her lie, the way she wants. The writing is thus the assertion of a self – hood created by oneself. Thus Shobha De creates Karuna as a liberated woman who calls off her marital relationship to seek her self – identity. She is marginalized as an ordinary traditional woman in her early days but she rejects marriage completely from her life. She overcomes all the conflicts and struggles to create an identity for her.

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