

Patriarchal Domination and Feminine Sensibility in Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*

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Abstract. Shobha De holds a unique place among Indian feminist authors. Apart from being a novelist, she has been a regular columnist for several newspapers. Her novels deal the life of modern and elite class women, the glamour and dark realities of cosmopolitan culture of Mumbai including Bollywood, patriarchy, gender issues, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship, and live-in-relationship. In most of her works we find a very candid portrayal of the most intimate side of women's life revealing their plight in the present day society. De's heroines soar above the patriarchal limits by asserting their rights regarding their sexuality. In the novel, *Second Thoughts* Maya, the protagonist symbolizing the recurring image of an orthodox Indian woman, gets disillusioned in double folds- firstly, she could not pursue her career in fashion designing and secondly, she could not enjoy the intimacy and pleasures of a married life. She always says 'something is missing' in spite of enjoying all the basic needs and comforts in her life. Her plight compels her to say yes to the friendship offer of Nikhil but soon she gets disillusioned with her boyfriend as well. Thus, Maya is neglected and criticized by her husband and exploited and cheated by her lover but using her feminine sensibility she learns how to live happily with her love-less, cold husband. The present paper focuses on how patriarchy operates in the current society, how it limits the career opportunities for an aspiring woman, and how it tries to strangle pleasures and sexuality within the marital line and domesticity. The current paper also delves into the protagonist's agony, inner conflicts and other psychological conditions and above all her female sensibility through which she normalized her life in this male dominating world.

Keywords : Patriarchy; feminine sensibility; psyche; transgression; alienation; marginality.

Feminine sensibility generally relates to the females and their experiences around the environment of their family and society or the world where they exist. It is more concerned with a woman's psyche, feelings and emotions for her own miseries in various circumstances. A study of feminine sensibility focuses on probing into the consciousness of one's

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own situation as a woman becoming an object of exploitation and oppression. It also involves some sorts of understanding that allows a woman to sense the mechanism of oppression perpetrated by the male dominated society. In fact, feminine sensibility expresses one's own perspective as a woman. As far as psyche is concerned, it describes the realms of the unconscious and the world of imagination. The unconscious itself is determined by various factors including one's relationships with others and varied experiences gained from different stages of life.

The status of women all over the world particularly in India has been undergoing a rapid change in the recent decades. Women of Oriental tradition were generally understood 'adjustable, accommodative, pliable and service-minded.' They were facing the age old subjugation and humiliation. They were considered as mere 'man's shadow-self' or 'the otherness of man' but not with man. The image of traditional Indian women as obedient daughters, dedicated wives and devoted mothers were idealized in Indian English writings but this stereotyped image has been frequently challenged by numerous women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De and many others. We observe emergence of 'new woman' in their works. A 'New Woman' is always in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life. These authors have questioned the subaltern position of women in society and taken the charge of elevating them up to men's level. They have shown keen interest in the issues of women's exploitations at all levels in every walk of life. They are genuinely feminist in their attitude and approach. A feminist recognizes partiality in the male dominating world and raises a voice of protest against it. For a modern woman feminism means a rebellion against such partiality and she struggles hard to achieve the racial, social, economic and political equality with man.

The protagonists of such feminist authors protest against their existing problems and strive hard to extricate themselves from the cruel clutch of the strong norms of orthodox, patriarchal society that ensure them liberty, equality and success in their desired fields. Ratna Bhattacharya is very hopeful for the bright future of modern women. She has rightly observed:

Women are surrounded by traditions,
conventions and confinement but the

Indian English Literature provides us the glimpse of a new type of women. The scope of woman empowerment is immense and has given a vision of elemental passion poised with deep rootedness in convention but concerned with vital gender issues. (Bhattacharya, 43)

Shobha De is very popular as a best-selling author. Her well-known novels include *Socialite Evenings* (1998), *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996). She has also written some non-fictional works such as *Uncertain Liaisons* (co-edited with Khushwant Singh) (1993), *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings* (1994), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Surviving Men* (1997), *Selective Memory* (1998), *Speed Post* (1999) and *Spouse* (2004). She also has been a freelance writer and columnist for several newspapers and magazines. She also edited the three magazines- *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*. Shobha De as a dynamic journalist, she has observed the glamorous world of modeling, films and high society women and so, having the close study of such women, she is well aware of their situations, their psyches, and behaviour. Her main characters include modern urban women of elite class or sometimes high middle class. They are extremely conscious of their physical and emotional needs. De's novels deal with the life of modern and elite class women, the glamour and dark realities of cosmopolitan culture of Mumbai including Bollywood, patriarchy, gender issues, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship and live-in-relationship. She remarkably highlights the female subjugation and exploitation and the marginalized state of female sexuality in the hegemonic patriarchal society.

The present paper focuses on how patriarchy operates in the current existing society, how it limits the career opportunities for an aspiring woman and how it tries to strangle pleasures and sexuality within the marital line and domesticity. Patriarchy indicates towards the male domination over female in society. In patriarchal society men make all the decisions in the family and society itself. They are considered superior to women. They hold every position of power and authority possible to control women in family and society. Mitchell, a feminist defines patriarchy as a "kinship system in which men exchange women" (Mitchell, 24). Walby defines it as "a system of social structures and

practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 20) Patriarchy can also be defined as a system of social organization in which the most influential roles are reserved for men, while women are excluded from achieving parity with men. In patriarchal society women are convinced to accept artificial and man-made gender roles and rules as natural and desirable for their happy and balanced life. Simone De Beauvoir rightly says, “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (Beauvoir, 295). The women do not only follow such patriarchal rules but also pass them to their next generation. In this way such ideologies have been coming generation after generation. At this situation, “it is natural for the female human being to make herself a feminine woman” (428). Under the garb of such ideologies men very easily exploit women to work in their favour; they do not hesitate to suppress and oppress them including inflicting tortures and torments or doing other sorts of violence against them. At such a critical situation, a feminist writer has double responsibility upon her shoulder- first, to make women aware about their actual position in their family and society and second, to provide them with powerful weapons to fight against their exploitation and existing patriarchal order. Many feminist authors regard that patriarchal thoughts about women have created a great barrier in the way of the progress of women. Sonali Patil, in her research article observes:

In order to destroy the supremacy of patriarchal culture, human beings should be identified as male and female based on their sex not as men and women. The term ‘woman’ connotes the quality of woman, which the society attributes to a female. She should be obedient, patient and servile in her behaviour towards others. The moment a woman does something different the society would call her either a bad woman or lunatic. Human beings are not products, which come out of a factory to be alike. It is high time that the patriarchal culture ceased to exist for the all round development of women. (Patil, 445)

As a sensitive and dedicated feminist, Shobha De is against the image of women characters as love-slaves or mere helpmates at home

who cry for liberty and equality in this patriarchal world. She has raised the issues of the most sensitive aspects of women's life with utmost care but with apt candour. She recognizes the marginalization of women in matrimony and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through their writings. She recklessly overthrows traditionally established institution of marriage system. She has shown daredevil courage in highlighting the issues of marginality in women's sex life in traditional arranged marriage system. The frank and graphic portrayal of sex scenes in her novels has invited scathing criticism several times. She is often criticized as 'Vatsayayan,' 'Pasha pulp', 'soft porn queens' and 'vamp feminist'. Here one thing is highly noticeable that her feminism is not directed towards any specific definition. The essence of feminism is itself articulated through her women characters' positions in their families, workplaces and society. She herself in her autobiographical work, *Selective Memory: Stories of My Life* (1998) admits, "I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag. I feel strongly about the women's situation" (De, 202).

During the 19th century the feminists started their strong voices against the silent suffering of traditional woman in the male dominating society. In patriarchal societies, women as a group are understood inferior than men as a group and so they are collectively excluded from social, political and economic positions of power; they are paid less than men for the same work. As a result, they experience poverty and have unequal access to resources, goods and services. However individual women are enjoying the taste of success in the field of their choices, women as a distinct social group are disadvantaged in various ways in social relations and organizations. In domestic life woman has to live under the strict social control of the father, the husband and the son. They are marginalized in every walk of life at the hands of men, the dominant social group. In a patriarchal society, men dominate, oppress and exploit women under orthodox, social structures. We observe gender inequality between socially defined men and women.

In Shobha De's novel *Second Thoughts*, the protagonist Maya is portrayed as a brilliant, beautiful young middle class Bengali girl aspiring for settling down in Mumbai and making her career in designing. But soon after her marriage with Ranjan, a Mumbai based bank executive, gets disillusioned. Maya's marriage was solemnized under arrange marriage system in which male members in her family play a very crucial

role, conforming to the structures of Indian patriarchal society. Ranjan turns out to be a very cold husband who loves only his work and his mother and nothing else. As a husband he is unable to satisfy her physically and emotionally. His apathetic and neglectful behaviour compels his innocent wife to look for another option. She has to say yes to the lusty offer of friendship by Nikhil, a college going boy living in the same apartment. But, being an orthodox Indian wife, it was not easy for her to cross the marital line. She thinks a lot before she makes her decision. Her mind says that it will be a great betrayal with her husband and it will bring a big disgrace upon her and her family. But her inner urge of sex (which was not satisfied by her husband) was so powerful that she stretches her hands towards the college boy who is 'good-looking, confident, sporty, cocky, flirtatious, lazy, spoilt and quite irresistible' (32). Her young body desperately wants fulfillment. She spends a pleasant morning with him going somewhere in the city but at the same time she feels an acute sense of guilt in the heart but when she observes her hollow, loveless existence of married life, she seems to justify her relation with the Bombay boy. Her womanly love is totally shifted to Nikhil. She starts loving her with all modes and manners. Writing a letter to the boy, her emotions flow:

Nikhil...I wish you were here with me just now. I like your voice. I like the way you talk. I like your teasing me. I even like it when you get angry. But best of all, I like your laughter did you know that? Have I told you? Probably not I'm far too shy. (194)

Now with her Bombay boyfriend, she can see her dream city, share personal intimate feelings and enjoy the womanly pleasures with less guilt. About the boy, she unhesitatingly reveals her feelings :

I wanted to reassure him of my love in case he was insecure. My commitment to him was total. Unwavering. True. I was sure he knew this instinctively. That's why, I wasn't overly worried. We had all the time ahead of us. Our entire lives. (282)

Here it is observed that her biological need of sex and emotional emptiness which was recklessly neglected by her husband is greatly

respected by his boyfriend. Now she is enjoying her life with fulfillment and satisfaction. The fact is that sex is a natural physical need for all living beings. The urge of sex cannot be suppressed for too long. The continuous frustration due to sexual dissatisfaction may prove to be extremely hazardous. It may bring forth numerous psychological disorders and physical ailments. Sigmund Freud in his famous book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, remarks :

The more strictly a woman has been brought up and the more sternly she has submitted to the demands of civilization, the more she is afraid of taking this way out and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty; she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis. Nothing protects her virtue as securely as illness.

(Freud, 51)

Even the role of media is not ideal in presenting the image of women. Media idealize the orthodox, patriarchal society. It has carved the definition of good and bad women. Women who are submissive and have the tolerance to bear all the atrocities silently meted upon them are portrayed as good. Women who are confident and boldly resist any exploitation and oppression inflicted to them are thought to be bad ones. Even aspiring and ambitious women who live away from family and try to shape their career and become financially independent are also not in the good list of society, especially in the case of a married woman the situation becomes worse and more unpleasant. In her essay, "Women in Film Noir", Janey Place examines how visual media portray female sexuality :

Women are defined in relation to men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture.... the primary crime the 'liberated' woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined in such a way, and this refusal can be perversely seen (in art, or in life) as an attack on men's very existence. (Place, 35)

A woman is allowed to play out the role of a liberated, sexually active person on screen, but depicting her unhappy ending insures that it won't happen in real life, "It is clear that men need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it" (36). In such a way visual media enforce the ideology that women who do not conform to social norms are ostracized and thus caution women about the consequences that would happen in real life if women are liberated from male dominance.

Maya's relational transgression unfolds several causes including the cold, dry and passive behaviour of her husband and her alienated existence. As a husband, Ranjan has been unable to understand the feelings and emotions of her newly married wife. He does not show any warmth of love to her. Maya's position at her residence is not more than a housemaid. As a wife of the bank executive enjoys all the possible comforts and pleasures of worldly life but is devoid from happiness as she is not satisfied with her husband in terms of physical pleasures and other emotional issues. In bed they have been "brothers, or sisters or flat mates" (*Second Thoughts*, 251). Once her husband returns after ten days from Calcutta, Maya during her bed time, tries to snuggle up and caress him but her signal is not responded positively. He has not shown any emotion of love, instead starts scolding her very badly. With fear and aversion he starts "jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He had lain trembling in bed for a long time, his breathing heavy, his eyes screwed shut." [He bursts:] "Stop behaving like a cheap woman, a prostitute" (259). Of course, under the same roof they lived as foreigners. Moreover, the man never missed a single chance to criticize her. He fails to understand the woman's psyche, her emotions, feelings, desires and needs.

Thus, Maya gets disappointment many times from her husband. She is shocked and surprised at the sexual debility of her husband but she is far too shy to discuss her personal matters to anybody publically on T.V. before a panel for counseling. As a typical Indian wife, she does not want to reveal the world that her husband and she 'had no sex life at all' or she had never experienced an orgasm' and she would 'never bear children. (257) She herself wants to resolve this matter and so summoning her courage she tries to discuss the matter with her husband but she was rebuked at very hard :

What's your problem? You are beginning to sound like some sort of a nymphomaniac. Are you that sex-

starved ? Nothing else on your mind?
How can sex be so important to
anybody? I've never understood. If your
mind is busy and you keep yourself
active, where is the time to worry about
sex? Really, I'm shocked" (257).

Maya also suffers from her alienated existence, a deep sense of loneliness at physical, emotional and social levels. Her husband leaves for the bank in the morning and returns his flat at night. Not only so, even at his flat he keeps himself busy in the office work and watching news on the television but hardly shares his intimacy with her wife. His mother lives in another flat of some different building at some distance. Maya's maternal uncle lives at some other place in the same city. She has no friends to talk to or share her personal feelings or problems. She writes to Nikhil, "I don't know anybody besides my in-laws and my maternal uncle. I don't have a single friend I can talk to. I miss my parents, my home, my environment, and mainly my freedom" (192). Her words reveal Maya's emotional emptiness in her life, and so it is natural for her to seek some other alternative to share her personal feelings and emotions. When Nikhil enters into her life, he is warmly welcomed by her. But to her shocking, her happiness with Nikhil could not continue for long as he proved to be a deceiving fellow. He has shown his false love just to seduce her physically. After ten days, she comes to know about Nikhil's engagement to Anshu, a Delhi based girl. She feels herself badly cheated. Her dreams seem to be shattered. Being neglected and insulted by her husband and exploited and cheated by her lover, she feels totally disillusioned but at the same time she decides to come out of the complexities of her life and enjoy the personal liberty and complete pleasures of womanhood in the external world. Actually the cold, loveless attitude of her husband and the seducing and exploiting nature of her boyfriend makes her bold enough to frequently break the solemn bond of marriage in order to enjoy the fruits of freedom in her life. Thus, she normalized her life using her feminine sensibility. She has learnt how to live happily with her cold husband in this male dominated society.

Maya's character somewhat resembles with that of Karuna, the protagonist of Shobha De's novel *Socialite Evenings*. Karuna belongs to a middle class family, but the glamorous atmosphere of Mumbai makes her feel ashamed of her origin and status and so she makes great efforts

to look like a rich, fashionable lady. She leaves her middle class old values and embraces the high life of the rich upper class. With the help of Anjali, a prominent socialite in Bombay Karuna plunges into the ultra-modern world of fashion and glamour. She chooses modeling as her career against her father's desire and soon becomes a part of popular cosmopolitan culture of Mumbai. Karuna marries a man just for his money. Later she finds that she has made a great mistake in choosing her husband because the man turns out to be unexciting and uninspiring. Impelled by her desire for fun and excitement, she cheats her husband and plans for a holiday with her lover Krish, "While he was innocently instructing me, I was already planning, when and how I'd meet Krish. At the airport? Hotel? What we'd do together- how liberated and free we'd feel without any pressures on us" (*Socialite Evenings*, 128). While comparing Karuna with Maya, we find both of them outgoing and fun-loving. Their husbands prove to be cold and passive. They cross the marital line and make boyfriends to live their cherished lives. According to social norms of patriarchal society, such transgression in marriage is not allowed as it is the matter of prestige of the family. But, De seems to give ground for it in the case of the marginalized state of sexuality caused due to the love-less and neglectful attitude of the woman's partner.

As a conscious feminist, Shobha De has raised the most sensitive issue of mute suffering of a married woman very sensibly. She advocates gender equality in every aspect of life- personal, social, political, cultural and financial. Her heroines challenge the patriarchal set-ups by asserting their rights regarding their social status and sexuality. As a responsible author and radical feminist, she justifies the woman's relational transgression but only in the marginalized state of her married life. To my view also, man is more responsible for his woman's crossing the solemn bond of marriage. He should be sensitive enough to understand her psyche and care for her physical and emotional needs. Of course, he should respect her individuality as a woman in order to check such transgression in married life. But, in some cases, women's own lust and desires for prosperous and luxurious life also make her cross the marital line. In the novel, *Second Thoughts*, the protagonist Maya extricates herself from the complexities of her dull, cold life and finds her way in order to live a life of her dream full of freedom and enjoyment using her feminine sensibility conforming to the rigid strictures of the patriarchal society.

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