

A STUDY OF SUBLIME OF THE SUBALTERN WOMAN IN SHOBHAA DE'S SOCIALIST EVENINGS

C. Sandhanam, Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai - 21
Dr. A. Vigneshkumar, Assistant Professor of English, The Madura College, Madurai - 16

Abstract

Women's writings are considered as a powerful media of modernism and influential tools of postmodernism. They not only project the external world but also the inner world of women. Shobhaa De, one of the pioneers in bringing poor urban women to limelight, seems to show the arrival of new women who rebel against the existing subordination and passivity of women. Her women characters try to regain self-confidence and self-respect through their self-assertion and self-sustainability. Shobhaa De who has awakened the spirit of new woman Karuna to realize her potential to face and challenge any sort of obstacle and choose her path. The modern, urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women of Shobhaa De transform themselves from commodities to identities, from subaltern to sublimity, from ignorance to knowledge, from caged birds to free birds, and from clutches to emancipation. The paper explores the sublime of subaltern woman in the novel *Socialite Evenings*.

Key Words: *Sublime, Subaltern, New Woman, Liberated Women, Emancipated Women*

Literature is the mirror of society. Literature reflects the social, cultural, economic and historical life of human beings. Women's writing is considered as a powerful media of modernism and influential tools of postmodernism. They not only project the external world but also the inner world of women. Susie Tharu points out that "an important phase of growth of fiction in India as elsewhere is the gradual shift from the external world to the inner world of the individual. The focus of interest lies in the portrayals of states of mind rather than holding up the mirror of society" (Tharu 112). According to Bhavya: "Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides matching the pace of the world. We see them bursting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances. They are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work" (Bhavya 64).

Shobhaa De is an advocate of the feminist thoughts and a budding genius in the domain of Modern English Literature and depicts New Indian Woman in her fiction. Shobhaa De has been recognized for her status as a robust view maker in feminist circles. Out of the seventeen novels of her writings so far the most important ones are *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, *Strange Obsession*, *Shooting from the Hip*, *Small Betrayals*, *Second Thoughts*, *Selective Memory*, *Surviving Men*, *Speed Post*, *Spouse: The Truth about Marriage*, and *Snapshots*. These novels present the emancipation of women and project the ultra modern lifestyle of neo-rich people. Bijay Kumar Das comments, “Shobhaa De dives deep into the hearts of liberated, upper-class women in the contemporary society and depicts her characters as they are and not as they should have been” (Das 1997). Her women characters have become aware to liberate themselves from the clutches of the unjust taboos and customs imposed on them by the dominating society. She belongs to the group of women novelists, who have written on the sublimity, greatness, liberation and emancipation of women.

The women of Shobhaa De move from subaltern to sublimity by revolt, recognition, reversal of order of patriarchy. They are assertive and bounce back at the unsuccessful males who are hollow and hypsometrical. De’s women characters expose and challenge the male hypocrisy and their supposed authority. Throwing aside their submissiveness, they turn to the extremes of being violently radical, defiantly uncompromising, overly promiscuous and even openly malicious. In Indian society women are treated as subaltern and merely as man’s shadow self. Subjugation, marginalization and subalternism are the vital factors that have led women to fight for their equal rights, equal opportunities and equal position in the society. They have been subordinated in all spheres of life on earth. Richa Nehra aptly puts forward the nature of this subaltern group as: “Subaltern person is one who is of junior grade, inferior in rank or status, the junior faculty, a lowly corporal. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries under the influence of Marxism, nationalism, postcolonialist theory and feminism, subaltern has come to be used broadly to represent subordination in social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies” (Nehra 2). Gayatri Spivak is of the view that, “Subaltern is a person or a group of people that have been excluded from society. They do not have a voice and are lost in the world due to assimilation and colonialism. In different historical contexts, the subaltern has been understood as synonymous with women, children, colonial subjects, the poor, the illiterate, the proletariat, or the religious or ethnic minority” (225).

De has focused on the problem of subaltern urban women and their genuine aspirations for economic independence, equality and freedom. She expresses that her women are either against subalternity or have a quest for moving against subalternity and to try to reach sublimity amidst the traditional, biased, controlled atmosphere of patriarchy. Shivike Verma states: “Shobha De has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of women are sex oriented and sex centered in the male dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains of husband and society, reactionary and rebel and new woman and a liberated human being” (Verma 192).

Shobhaa De’s concern on the marginalization of women in Indian society is that the majority of women were content with their lot of subordination in the home and society but modern women have articulated their discontent with their substandard status and strived for equality with men. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* plays diverse roles at diverse times to accomplish her emotional needs. According to Bhavya, “Shobha De’s attack is not against the individuals. It is against the system that favors men and causes women subjugation and marginalization. She projects the ideas of liberating women through self realization. She is emancipated against the orthodox role of women and dominates her male counterparts” (Bhavya 66). Karuna says, “In the house not jumping at the sound of Father’s voice, booming out some command. Not putting my stuff away after school. Leaving a dirty thali on the dining table, whistling in the bathroom, back combing and teasing my hair, refusing to fetch trays of tea for boring visitors, being cheeky with relatives mainly not cowering in the presence of elders...” (*Socialite Evenings* 6-7).

It has been the desire of Karuna to get rid of her middle class background and shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle run government official. Karuna employs herself in modeling for the ad agency. Knowing the fact she acts in an ad agency Karuna’s father summons his wife and says to Karuna: “When did you do this? How dare you? Do you want to disgrace us completely? This is not something girls from respectable families do. How did this photograph get here? I just stared and stared at the ad. Actually it looked pretty good and I looked pretty good too. A smile must have appeared on my face because suddenly I felt Father’s palm hitting me sharply across the face” (SE 24).

She not only struggles against the patriarchal father but also against patriarchal system of marriage and relationships. Karuna gets married to a young rich man and later realizes failure of her marriage. She says, "My marriage went sore because I married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time" (SE 64-65). One can understand this as she protests about her meaningless marital life: "You really make me sick. I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We have 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 a woman I am" (SE 176-177). As for extra marital affair though Karuna knew that such kinds of affairs are labelled as crime legally within her marriage she finds herself trapped and is exposed through her own satiric narratives. "I think that in this era of the globalization fever there is an increase in number of people who regards such affairs as ventilators providing fresh air of sustenance to a soul being suffocated in unhappy surroundings caused by wrong choice and mismatched sense and sensibility" (SE 50).

Karuna encourages even her friend Ritu to get divorced. She says to Ritu, "We are both free in a way freer than most other couples. There are no children in both marriages and respective spouses aren't to create hurdles. The whole thing could be handled in civilized way without creating too many ripples. Divorce isn't such a dirty word anymore. I'm sure my mother-in-law would feel pretty relieved" (SE 52). As Varsha Hadgekar observes, "Karuna rejects the traditional way of life. She rejects the hierarchization of male values where the female factor is repercussions. She is isolated from traditional Indian heritage and its' social implication. Taking a non-conformist stance she wants to destroy the sex and create a new society in which men and women are equal at every level" (Hadgekar 50).

As a New Woman Karuna is independent in every way she breaks the bonds of marriage and lands her feet firm into the profession and becomes emotionally and financially independent. Karuna questions her mother: "But mother, why does security rest with a man?' I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don't really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I am not answerable to anyone Or he a good husband to me. Perhaps we are both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any sacrifices not now?" (SE 268). According to Sonia Ningthoujam, "Marriage is no longer regarded as an essential element for the well being of the family and society in De's novels. Marriages are no longer considered to be made in heaven.

Educated and attractive confident and assertive this new class of women has given marriage a new meaning because of the absence of mutual faithfulness between husband and wife” (Ningthoujam 110).

Shobhaa De reacts against the male culture and strongly detests the insubordinate of women. According to Sarah Grimke, “Shobha De destroys this distorted and deteriorated image of woman and therefore, the female characters in her novels appear more powerful than men. No doubt, women need the companionship of men to satisfy their natural urge, but De’s women are bold and sexually liberated. They establish extra-marital affairs to get rid of their marital boredom” (Grimke 10). The image of the new emancipated woman who can challenge men in their own space is vividly presented in Shobhaa’s De’s novels. All her novels indicate the emergence of a new woman curious to revolt against the traditional moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. As an empowered woman, the characters are in search of self-identity seeking liberation in all walks of life replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. She has awakened the spirit of new woman to realize her potential to face and challenge any sort of obstacle and to choose her own path. Thus, the modern, urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women of Shobhaa De transform themselves from commodities to identities, from subaltern to sublimity, from ignorance to wisdom, from caged birds to free birds, and from clutches to emancipation.

WORKS CITED

- Bhavya, L. “Women’s Identity in Shobhaa De’s Novels with Reference to *Socialite Evenings*.” *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, vol. 4, no. 2, February 2018, pp. 64-66.
- Das, Bijay Kumar. *The Author and the Text: A Study of Shobha De’s Snapshots*. Creative Books, 1997.
- De, Shobhaa. *Socialite Evenings*. Penguin Books Ltd., 1989.
- Grimke, Sarah. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman*. Burt Frank, 1990.

- Hadgekar, Varsha. "Women in Socialite Evenings." *Universal Research Analysis*, vol. 1, no. 2, March-August 2011, p. 50.
- Nehra, Richa. Against Sexual Subalternity in Shobhaa De's Novels. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 2012, pp. 1-4. www.the-criterion.com. Assessed 09 June 2019.
- Ningthojam, L. Sonia. *The Image of New Woman in the novels of Shobhaa De*. Prestige Books, 2006.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 217-313.
- Tharu, Susie. "Is there a Tradition in Woman's Literature?" *The literary Criterion*, vol. 1 & 2, 1986.
- Verma, Shivika. "The Novels of Shobhaa De: A Feminist Study." *Indian Writers in English*, edited by Binod Mishra and Sanjay Kumar, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2006.