

**Oppression, Resistance and Surrender of Maya
in
Shobha De's "Second Thoughts"**

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Abstract

Literature in its myriad forms speaks of human life. A true literary artist explores and reveals life more precisely as he or she deals with the realistic nature of man and society as a whole. Shobha de, an eminent novelist of modern India is one such literary artiste who brings forth idiosyncrasies' of society in naturalistic terms through her novels. Shobha de is a columnist, novelist, model and also a journalist. Her versatile personality made her explore the physical and mental agonies of women through the characters in her novels. A careful study of her novel Second Thoughts reveals her feminine concerns. The present article deals with the vital realities about the predicaments of an urban woman and her exploitation by a man. This article focuses on how women, in spite of many liberation movements, are expected to remain submissive and prove themselves as good wives in Indian patriarchal society. The paper makes the reader think about how a society can achieve balance between the minds of man and woman.

Key Words: feminine concerns, patriarchy, exploitation of women, balance of minds.

Shobha De in her seventh novel Second Thoughts (1996) delineates the hollowness of matrimonial life of the protagonist Maya. It is the story of Maya's unhappy and dull married life with Ranjan and her intimate relationship with a neighbourhood boy Nikhil, which ends in Nikhils deception of Maya and her forced continuation of loveless matrimonial relationship. The novel is a realistic presentation of the condition of woman in married life and the exploitation of women in the name of husband or in the name of love.

The story of Maya depicts socio-psychological aspects of middle class society by which many a married woman becomes a victim in the hands of the institution of marriage. Shobha De delves into the female psyche against the pride and egotism of man. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work “The Second Sex” states:

Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women, as we have seen, have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality (446).

Maya, the protagonist has come from a middle class Bengali traditional family. Maya’s parents considered Maya lucky to marry Ranjan as he has a foreign degree and a good job in Bombay. They dictate her several codes of conduct to be followed after her marriage. They say:

you have to get to know your new family and become one of them as quickly as possible. It is for your own good, for your sake, that mamu is leaving you alone. Don’t misunderstand that. Girls who cling on to their own family for too long never succeed in adjusting to their husband’s people. We don’t want that to happen to you. I’m sure you’ll understand. (De, Second Thoughts, 75)

The typical advice of the protagonist’s mother reflects the condition of married woman in Indian society. A married girl is always advised to shun her maternal identity and identify herself with her husband family’s identity. The concept that woman is someone else’s property has been internalized and so generally she acclimatizes herself to the extended family. The parental or societal influence on the girl is such that she does not dare to think beyond as her role is prescribed and proscribed. So she does her ‘gender’ which is a social construct. Maya too felt happy to marry Ranjan because for her, “Marrying Ranjan was like marrying Bombay. I thought I was the luckiest girl in my locality. Certainly, I was the only one who had bagged a foreign-educated, Bombay-based bridegroom. (215). Marriage is projected as the ultimate destination of woman in the patriarchal world. Education and career for a woman are encouraged only if they do not encumber with the prospect of marriage.

Maya has a degree in textile designing and she dreamt of making a career in textile designing by living in Bombay but she is not encouraged to work by her parents because that might be a hurdle for her alliances, as many men would not prefer a working woman as their life partner. It is the male centredness and egoism of a man in the society even in modern times that does not allow a man prefer to marry a girl if she is highly educated and financially independent to. If a woman is financially independent it is always considered that she cannot make a good wife.

A woman is not expected to build a world of her own as she always has to rely on man to build her world. ‘Her world’ in true sense is ‘his world’ as a woman is expected to see the world

or make the world through the eyes of man. In a man's world, a girl's 'dreams or ambitions' are always of secondary importance. She is fettered to take any decisions regarding her life. Her husband has the sole right to decide upon her ambitions or dreams whether to be fulfilled or not. Mays's dreams of becoming a textile designer are shattered after her marriage as her mother-in-law and her husband do not like her working.

Ranjan's marriage with Maya is not a choice for him but a chance, because, his mother has selected Maya, as she is from a traditional middle class family. She presumes that to assert her authority on the daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law should always be preferred from a socially inferior background. Ranjan is very much influenced by her mother. She states that:

it's always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background. Grief comes to a man who marries above his station. A wealthier wife spells doom. The husband loses all control over her and she ends up having the upper hand. Such a marriage can never work which is why we were so careful while selecting the right candidate for Rajan. We definitely didn't want a fast Bombay girl. You'd be surprised how Bengali girls change once they taste Bombay life. As for those who've been brought up here---you wouldn't recognize them as proper Bengalis. They can't speak their own mother tongue, I tell you. Know nothing about our customs. Care two hoots for our traditions.' (254)

'Marriage' for a woman "is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. (de Beauvoir 445) and so is "not generally founded upon love.(453) Ranjan is sexually impotent. How much ever Maya tries to arouse his sexual feelings, he does not respond. Instead he humiliates Maya for her feelings of love making. He says: "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 being so important to anybody, I've never understood. (De, Second Thoughts, 351) Physical urge in a married life is not uncommon whether to a man or a woman. A man is considered romantic for his physical desires while a woman is humiliated if she expresses her interest in physical gratification. For woman physical gratification is a communion of minds and not just of a body.

Marital relationships can be strengthened when the two people involved in the relationship try to resolve any issue with a unified mind. Every interaction the couple faces helps them understand each other better to move ahead in their life as they are associated for a life time. Ranjan's loveless attitude has thrown Maya into dejection and loneliness. For a married woman husband is everything and if she does not receive any kind of affection and love she is obviously depressed. She cannot share her feelings with anyone. She expresses her feelings of loneliness to Ranjan, but he always pays a deaf ear. "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." (134) Maya's effort to share at least an emotional bond with her husband goes futile as he never tries to understand her mind. Instead he always shows his authority by dictating her in all aspects of domesticity as he is a typical man in patriarchy. "Through marriage woman is now no longer lent from one clan to another: she is

torn up by the roots from the group into which she was born, and annexed by her husband's group ..." (114). She does not belong to her parents anymore. So, Maya thinks: "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" (372-73).

Maya's deep-seated hunger for love and affection from her husband perhaps makes her vulnerable to the neighboring boy Nikhil's care and attention towards her. Nikhil, Ranjan's colleague's son tries to sweep away her loneliness and generates interest in her towards life. Maya is initially hesitant to talk to Nikhil and tries to put him away by saying that: "Listen Nikhil ... whether it's in Calcutta or Bombay, a married woman is not supposed to meet other men. That's all." (187) Maya being a product of patriarchy believes naturally that she ought to follow the norms imposed by society on a woman. Though a woman is born free like a man, her free spirit is shackled by several norms prescribed to her by the society and patriarchy leading to her secondary status and subjugation in many ways. Meeting a man in the absence of husband is considered immoral and unchaste. Duality of moral principles exists in society. Chastity matters only for a woman but not for a man. Man courting a woman is a sign of virility. He is granted societal permission to satisfy his physical urge if his wife has any physical or psychological problem. But for a woman it is unchaste and she is disregarded and degraded in the society. She has to bear with any kind of physical or psychological problems of her husband and should never ever express any grievance. While a man is sympathized a woman is blamed.

'Second thoughts' in Maya begin not because she is crazy in fulfilling her ambitions but for her loveless life. Her husband is not supportive in times of her loneliness and does not fulfill even slightest desire like going for an outing. He always humiliates her and asks her to focus only on domestic duties. Woman in modern times is quite expressive, and in fact termed as new woman for her attitude and assertion. This kind of change is ascribed to womans' education. Nikhil's companionship makes Maya fill the existing vacuum in her life. So, in spite of her fears for society, she starts enjoying his friendship in going out and in talking to him and tries to liberate her 'self'. But, Nikhil is an opportunist, and like any other man in the patriarchal world advances his moves and develops a physical relationship with Maya. Maya's initial protest to his advances subsided before the bliss of the physical union.

Nikhil kissed her lips, touched her and Maya felt, Every bit of me was suddenly alive to the feel of Nikhil's lips, hands, arms, neck, chest, knees and legs. An unknown recklessness started to sweep over me. May be I was going crazy. I did not 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 (375).

Maya's relationship with Nikhil or any married woman's relationship with other man perhaps is not legally approved. But for a woman like Maya, it is a let out for her emotional crisis. Maya, a new woman of modern times has liberated her free spirit in the patriarchal world by going against the established norms for women in the society. Her 'second thoughts' are a result from the vacuum and emotional crisis which is never accepted by the society but the

‘second thoughts’ of man are always accepted. Maya’s ‘second thoughts’ shatter patriarchal hegemony. Freedom and liberation of new urban woman in Shabha De’s writing reflects woman’s involvement in extra-marital relationship which does not strike a chord with traditional norms of the society. It throws a challenge to society as to what chastity is.

Maya though protests against man, against life, against situation, but fails to make good escape from them. Nikhi’s exit from her life owing to his alliance is a state of impasse and pushes Maya back to her loveless life. Maya and Ranjan can never make a home for themselves as they are two different individuals living under one roof.

The novel “Second Thoughts” raises questions about chastity, conjugal love and wonders finally whether a state of androgyny is ever possible in a patriarchal society.

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