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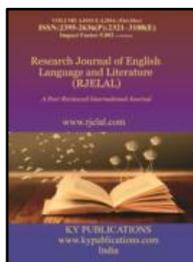
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UNRAVELLING THE MARITAL MUDDLE: A CASE STUDY OF SHOBHA DE'S SECOND THOUGHTS

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ABSTRACT



Shobha De's Novels expose the vicissitudes of modern society's marriage system and marital relations leading to frustration, conflict and loneliness. The present paper focuses on agony of Maya who feels trapped in matrimony. This paper also takes up the issue of the psychic cum social complexities of middle class Society. Here, the story revolves around Maya, a pretty girl who is eager to escape her dull, middle class home in Calcutta for the glamour of Mumbai, where she moves after marriage to Ranjan, a handsome ambitious man who has an American University degree and a wealthy family background. Maya neglected and criticized by her husband and exploited and deceived by her lover remains a "Silent Sufferer". The book's merit lies in De's ability to fathom and expose the hypocrisy present in most Indian marriages, the male ego, the dutiful wife, the overbearing mother-in-law, the social pretence and the public façade.

Keywords: Marriage, Female alienation, Male Ego, Society, Identity, Loneliness

Shobha Rajadhyaksha, also known as Shobha De (born 7 January 1948), is an Indian columnist and novelist. As a writer, she is gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss the sensitive aspects of human life and human relationship tactfully. The gift of her narration is just wonderful. She is totally different from other Indian women novelists in English. She is gifted with intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. Her novels expose the fissures in marital relations in elite class. They expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society's marriage system and marital relations leading to frustration, conflict and loneliness. *Second Thoughts* (1996) is the seventh novel of Shobha De. It traces female sensibilities in young icon personality, Maya, who is also stumbling in her life, with bearing aspirations like marriage, love, career and self-identity. In the hustle-bustle world of modernization and

globalization, today the young women are passing through some of the predicaments in their lives such as loneliness, search for identity, yearning for marital bliss and social status. Much of the action of the novel deals with this young middle class Bengali girl, who was born and brought up in Calcutta in a middle class family. Maya, the young protagonist is only child of her parent. She is an attractive young girl with warm and rich golden brown skin tone, gleaming jet black hair and large dark eyes. Her key worries were also about her future, marriage etc.

She was trained as textile designer and like every youngster who was also against the opinion of an arranged marriage, has also aspiration to become a leading journalist and to change the world. But her desire or ambition merely remains as mirage. She would like to continue one more year of her college education and to get a degree. But today one of the main problems for educated young girl is the

marriage. When these youngsters are studying, the parents always worry about their daughters. In her case also marriage takes precedence over career ambitions. Maya was more fascinated and in love with Bombay. When she met Ranjan, her prospective groom, she was more excited at the prospect of settling in Bombay, the city of her dreams. "Marrying Ranjan would make her a part of it immediately—Maya knew she'd be bonded with Bombay forever." Mrs. Malik and Ranjan did not approve of working women. Maya's uncle also supported them by saying that "In an Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows." Maya also belonged to a traditional family where a girl has inferior status and her education, career, ambitions, desires and dreams are of secondary importance. She is not free to take any decision of her life. After marriage whether she should pursue education, do job or be a home-maker is completely decided by her husband. That's why even though Ranjan and his mother disapprove of Maya's being a career woman, no one in Maya's family objected. Not even Maya as for Maya marrying Ranjan was like marrying Bombay.

Through this novel, De has projected the hollowness of Indian marriage as the recurring theme of the novel. Maya gradually realizes that her case was far more pitiable. She painfully ponders over that she and her husband were not made for each other. As a wife from middle class educated family, her existence became utterly wretched and pitiful. Incessant depressions and frustrations hovered completely over her life. A sense of nonbelonging was always growing and haunting in her soul. She compares her present state with that of banana seller woman on the footpath, who appears to her more fortunate, contented than her. The novel thus develops in the form of trials and tribulations of a young married girl from the upper middle class family. The protagonist of the novel, Maya, being young and having springs of aspiration of Mumbai's shining glow, too strongly yearns for stepping into one of the lively pubs, playing jazz and sway to the music, lose themselves a little in its carefree atmosphere, stroll along one of the many beaches, eat at roadside snacks. But this remains simply to her husband, Ranjan's skeptical threat of

two R's that was rape and will be robbed by rough people. And in the evenings he was always immersed in the newspapers.

The dominant theme of female loneliness or alienation runs through the whole novel. Like every young married woman, Maya too longed to attract the attention of her husband but Ranjan was so self-centred that he hardly had any time for her. He appears a man of less species and much as like a programmed robot man, who always indulges in a very tight schedule. In the morning he joins office, returns in the evening and after getting fresh, he was busy with T.V. programmes on BBC and CNN and then goes for sleep also mechanically. So where could he be aware about the family or married life? From his point of view, these things are merely secondary or subsidiary and accordingly the place of his wife was also subsidiary and only to see household responsibilities. And there were no words existed in his vocabulary like romance, outings, weekend picnic, and marketing. She was merely a puppet or showdoll in the showcase and all the programmes and plans were also restricted only on the remote control by Ranjan. Even reactions to flowers in an episode in the novel, indicate the alienated and mechanical relationship between husband and wife. As it is an instinctive feeling of every young woman of wearing flowers in her hair, Maya, too enjoyed wearing flowers in her hair. But when first time she came with gajra of mogras, skeptical Ranjan, 'shifted the air suspiciously', and asked with a usual small frown the cause of that peculiar smell. After marriage there was alienation, isolation that incessantly haunted her, and even before marriage in Calcutta it too haunted her, by her father-mother's stretched relations, their communication gap influenced and spoiled her childhood also. That was why in childhood instead of joy and mirth, there was gloominess associated with her. Her mother's holding communication with her dead sister and she was beaten by the witch doctor to cure her. Then mother's strong reaction to Maya's arrival into puberty, by slapping her forehead to indicate as if a catastrophe had descended both of them. When she was small girl, her mother has made her very self-conscious about her body and changing contours. Thus these were

excessive concerns by a typical Indian mother for her young daughter. It was Maya's pre-marriage predicament or alienation which still persisted after marriage too.

In Ranjan's opinion Maya was not supposed to talk to her neighbours, or even a door salesman. On one occasion he expressed his reaction against Maya's conversation with the mop salesman and he expostulates her by saying

Now you started chatting with the useless ruffians.(40).

Thus Ranjan's treatment to Maya was mostly like the maidservant or hired cook and less than a wife. He was also a miserly man and has implemented his banking instincts with his auditor's probing eyes on every expenditures and his obsession with balance restraining act, like using of STD facility or AC, to be used in his presence only. And his attitude was totally self-centered which has no consideration for his wife. She can never gain the confidence and sense of belonging to be able to call the house her own. She was compelled to give up her idea of learning pottery and supposed to give up herself too. As usual in a skeptical manner he has described the pottery classes as nothing but recruitment centre for prostitution. On another occasion, he gives an example of his mother's opinion. So in brief Maya's existence appears merely like that of bull, which was in olden days, yoked by a person to extract the edible oil, moving round and round in a circular motion to that machine. Maya was destined to the same condition.

The present status and existence of Maya as Mrs. Ranjan Malik was so distressful and isolated that there was no any to whom she could share her sorrow and ideas. So she was stumbling in the gloomy realm of isolation and loneliness. She was caught up, and some time torn between Ranjan and Mrs. Malik. She constantly ponders over that her maternal roots were cut off. This leads her to experience of rootlessness. Her frustration in married life is revealed on many occasions. Some time she watched several TV reality shows dealt with the subject of sex and revelations of them had been startling. This also forced her to ponder over about what made normal people on these shows and talk about such an intimate aspect of their lives.

Ranjan was strongly influenced by his mother. He selected Maya because she was Mrs. Malik's choice. But Ranjan at the same time spoke with contempt and in sarcastic tone about Maya's parents. Ranjan and Mrs. Malik had a feeling of superiority. They had purposely selected Maya to assert their control over her. However, as an Indian daughter-in-law Maya still has not lost the ultimate hope in marriage institution and yet not perverted from marital status, and even so never thought about extramarital affairs and tries to remain faithful. Even after Ranjan's bitter treatment to her, she, like a dutiful wife, consoled herself with the thought that Ranjan and she were not bad people. She ponders over further :

We were quite okay as compared to so many other people. Besides, I still harboured tremendous hope about our marriage, changing its pattern. I told myself these things took time. Marriage needed a great deal of effort. Even friendship in a marriage couldn't be forged instantly (353).

Thus, it was a panicky reaction on Maya's part to avoid the pitfalls, committed by her mother. And no doubt, it was the consequence of her mother's perennial advice to her about the sacrifice and anxiety to open her eyes to the right track of domestic life. Though Ranjan has made her so tense and self-conscious that Maya never felt free to be herself in his presence. But her consciousness to save her marriage made her think that situation was better to her than the other victimized women by their husbands. She observes her own state as :

I was lucky compared to women married to alcoholics or wife beaters. Ranjan had his faults, but he was not an evil man and I knew in my heart of hearts that he wished me well. He was generally kind to me, but his kindness was the sort people reserved for the physically handicapped or the abject poor (229).

Despite her secondary and subsidiary position and exclusion like status in the family, she never emerged in a bold rebellion form, but appears as a submissive, surrendering creature to her fate. Even the title *Second Thoughts* is also suitable and meaningful as far as the protagonist's domestic

predicament is concerned. Her choice of second thoughts falls in the form of Nikhil. Thus she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Bombay, but also of her marriage. The triangle form of the novel develops through the character of Nikhil Verma, Maya's fourth floor neighbour, a reckless, happy-go-lucky, young college going student and he was few years younger than Maya. His father Dipankar and Ranjan were colleagues at the bank. In her initial introduction to Nikhil, Maya sensed in him difference from his family members and gradually, with his daily casual greetings she begins to compare him with her husband. Nikhil was completely contrastive to Ranjan. Egoistic Ranjan always criticized Maya whereas talkative and impressive Nikhil flattered her even for smaller things. With the arrival of Nikhil in her life, she began to enjoy life once again. Along with Nikhil, she explored the real Bombay. She felt a kind of freedom which she had never experienced before. She shared smaller things with him. For the first time Maya went on bike with Nikhil to see Bombay and her joy was limitless. She poured out her emotions,

For the first time since my arrival in you city, I felt like laughing, singing, enjoying the salty sea air on my face. I looked at the sky and felt happy...(128)

Due to loneliness, lack of physical satisfaction, monotonous routine and emptiness in her married life, Maya was dragged towards Nikhil's magnetic personality. While enjoying life with Nikhil she also felt a kind of guilt that she was betraying Ranjan. She realized that it was wrong for a married woman to go out with a man and deceive her husband. But at the same time, she tried to console herself by saying that it is not at all a sin to go out and breathe fresh air. But Nikhil took advantage of Maya's crippling loneliness and depression and exploited her. He noticed her melancholia and the need of companion. Even Nikhil started calling her by her first name instead of Didi. He composed a song 'a lonely, lonely lady' on Maya that was heard by her several times and she was pleased to think that she could inspire Nikhil to compose a song. Maya, who was constantly neglected, humiliated and hurt, now for the first time found herself being praised and honored as the song was about her. When Ranjan

left for a tour for ten days, Maya felt relieved and carefree. Instead of missing him, she had a strange kind of relief. She felt free of pressure, free of approval seeking, being judged, watched, corrected, scolded, nagged, pushed and instructed. She went along with Nikhil for sightseeing. When Ranjan came back, once again Maya's life became absolutely depressed and pathetic. But later with the news of Nikhil's engagement all her dreams were shattered. Now she had no choice but to operate in the stifling atmosphere of her arranged marriage. Two totally detached people have to live again in the bond of matrimony.

Through Maya, the novelist wants to show that the suffering, the agony of marriage and the long silence that will remain forever in the lives of so many Indian women who accept marriage as a fate traditionally sanctioned to them. Maya is a representative. Even though woman like Maya will try to break the silence, she will have to return once again in the stifling atmosphere of marriage. Life is not a sweet dream but a harsh and bitter reality which a woman has to suffer silently. Maya has no option but to suffer the loneliness in her life. Maya wanted to assert her own identity, she wanted to be aggressive against the hypocritical standards of society but her silent scream stuck somewhere in her throat, unable to push its way out. The novel projects the psyche of Indian married woman caught and crushed between tradition and nature. Maya's silent cry for true companionship always remains unheard. The novel also exposes the nature of men. For Ranjan, there was no existence of Maya and for Nikhil, Maya was only an object to be enjoyed sexually. Maya was involved emotionally in Nikhil, only to be deceived later. Shobha De defines marriage in the following way. "Marriage to me connotes commitments and surrender, merging with, blending, overlapping and combing. It is a symbolic relationship where one feeds on the other depends on the other, needs the other".

But in case of Maya and Ranjan, the commitment, and becoming one is not at all seen. At first Maya tried to understand Ranjan. Actually she liked Ranjan. She made attempts to create conjugal closeness but Ranjan was always unmoved and aloof. He treated Maya just like a maid. The lack of

warmth, caring, understanding, sympathy respect appreciation and love from Ranjan's side resulted into Maya's frustration that led to her fall. Shobha De's maturity and insightfulness have reached new heights in this novel. It is Shobha De's master piece which throws light on the traditional Indian marriage in which woman is a silent sufferer.

To sum up, having analysed, assessed and evaluated the novel, we notice that some of the problems hinted here relate directly or indirectly to patriarchal setup of Indian society. In *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De has vigorously presented some of the ubiquitous marital issues like haunting loneliness, marriage ordeals, failures of marriage, divorce, extramarital affairs, communication gap between husband and wife, obsessions and yearnings to achieve something remarkable and perfection in the life, frustration and depression due to underestimation. The characters, who are the representatives of the society like Maya, Nikhil, Ranjan reflect their socially defined roles in traditional Indian Patriarchal set up. The anxiety of the researcher here is to truthfully depict the female sensibilities within the confines of an arranged marriage...

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