



Custom versus Contemporary Reality in Socialite Evening

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *A close study of the novel Socialite Evening reveals De's protest against the good and ideal image of woman in the name of tradition or custom. She tries her best to describe here those all attitudes of the society which reveal the female section of the society oppressed and submissive. Then she moves to the requirement and expectations of the modernity, the impact of western culture which has made our woman full of woman consciousness and through that more bold and explosive. But in doing this, if any human being may be male or female tries to cross the moral boundaries, his or her status or image will be fractured. And at the cost of mental peace and physical comfort he or she has to suffer a lot. So at last in the novel we see that to some extent the women characters of the novel do agree with the traditional code of conduct for women in the society. No doubt, they accept them with certain modification as they wish.*

Shobha De represents the real stories, still happening in real life. She depicts human relations based on gender distinctions, masculine domination and women's predicament relating to tradition and modernity. Being feminist De's novels raise a strong protest against the male dominated Indian society where women are denied freedom to act and live according to their will. They are considered as mere shadows of men and treated as the other. Here De tries to portray the Indian women in a modern developing, changing and conflict torn Indian urban society. Being fully aware about the opposing pulls of customs and contemporary reality, between Indian and western ways of living, between desire of a woman for independence and her need for future, She reflects this conflict in her works in especially the lives of the upper class women. *Socialite Evenings* is the first novel by De. It is a story of a Bombay socialite Karuna trying to drown the sorrows of failed marriage and failed relationships and schizophrenic sister in the party life of Bombay. The novel, through the character of Karuna, shows the marginalization of women at the hands of their husbands and how they try to turn the table against the established customs. In the novel we could find out how custom versus contemporary reality.

Custom is a tradition or a practice handed down to prosperity. It is a natural and inevitable part of human life. Much of our lives the way we live, the things we do, the ideas we believe in comes from our immediate past, that is, from our parents, grandparents and we turn hand these down to our children. The way we live our individual and social lives, our religious practices, our social and political institutes are to a large extent determined by customs. Our customs undergo changes and transformation as do people and culture. It's wrongly taken that customs and contemporary reality are contradictory. Contemporary reality is a positive awareness of the difference of these times to preceded ones. Though contemporary reality usually presents itself as an alarm-bell, it acknowledges that contemporary reality is only meaningful in its affinity with the reality of past. Contemporary reality is at war with customs only in a stagnating culture.

Women in India have age-long history of suffering. They have been treated with tainted indictments, emotional

abuses, sentimental disrespect, sexual distortions, submission and subjugation. Centuries have passed but they have been facing the same problems. No doubt some changes occur but they are not up to the marks. The past few years have been quite significant from the point of view of noticing changing face of women due to feminism or self-aware individuals. Many Indian English women novelists have captured these changes in their writings. Shobha is one of them. As Dodiya and Dhavan pointed out, "She is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of urban women in India." She is of the opinion that women are born free to live as they wish. Like males, they too have their rights to continue their lives as they wish. They are presented as an alarm to the well established social order which treats female differently to males, full of chastity than males. No doubt, this is wrong. Both should be expected same, same morality, same responsibilities to make the surrounding of the society more healthy to be survived in. But the reality is different. Our society still expects much more from the female section for the betterment or upliftment of the society. It is still believed that if the women will become more westernized in their culture the social set up will be disturbed more terrifically. It's a woman who holds the family relationship so tight. She can unite all morally to sustain healthy atmosphere of her family. Somehow it's true too. It's good that she is given this much respect. We salute the society. But at the same time it is also expected from the society that the respect and expectations from her must not be suffocating to her. She must be given freedom to live her life. At the same time she must conserve the moral values too for the sake of her family. It is also expected from males too. So, it means there should be a mutual understanding between the two to make their existence on the earth quite worthy and notable.

In this novel, we will see how her female characters have tried to surpass the established customs and come out to live in a society full of westernized culture, totally contemporary reality. The novel represents the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna, from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna is born in a remote

village in Maharashtra. She does not much remember of her childhood except her father's strictness and mother's indifference to understand their daughters. Karuna's present status only starts to be shaped when she comes to Mumbai. Once, she decides to be model. As she knows her father will never permit her for this she puts the proposal of joining this field as a career before her mother.

It's not possible to go to Delhi for two days. It takes that much time in the train,' she said without looking up from the puries she was frying...

'I'll be flying;

'Who is taking you-that woman?'

'Yes, They want us to take the show we did to Delhi'

'Who is they?'

'Some jewelers.'

'Father will not hear of it.'

'Please Ma, why don't you tell him to let me go. I'm not a kid anymore. All the other girls in my class are allowed to go wherever they want.

Why can't both of you trust me?'

'What about your college?'

'I have mid-term holidays at that time.'

'I will see Father's mood and then decide'. I hugged her with joy and went off to the room I shared with my sisters. 'I heard you talking to Mother', the older one said.

'So what?'

'So, now you want to go to Delhi and god knows where else with that woman. Do you know what people think of model-girls? They are no better than prostitutes'.

'So?'

'Everybody will think you are a prostitute'.

'So?'

'Don't you feel ashamed?'

'No',

'You will ruin your whole life....your future. No decent man will marry you'.

'I don't want to marry a decent man. He'll probably bore me to death;.

'In any case, Baba won't let you go'.

'We'll see.'³³

These very brief dialogues between Karuna and her mother and Karuna and her sister reveal a lot. It gives us a customary belief about marrying a decent man to be a happy woman is expected and to be a part of the world of modeling is nothing more than becoming a part of the

prostitution. It also discloses the changed mentality of the modern women that marrying decent men does not always give peaceful and happy live. Sometimes it becomes suffocating and hurdles for the freedom of the wives.

We could also come to know about the religious trust of some of the contemporary mass. Karuna says...

'My parents were not overly religious, but festivals were considered sacred. We couldn't skip any of the rituals-not even in the middle of our exams. Diwali remained the high point of our young lives. But other minor religious occasions were important too. "How I hated the month of Shravan. It meant bland, 'fasting food' on all Mondays, and vegetarian food for the rest of the week. This was torture. Not that we ate meat and fish every day, but Sundays were associated with a spicy mutton curry rich in coconut gravy. To be denied even this pleasure was too much. I cheated. Obliging non-Hindu friends at school cheerfully let me raid their lunch boxes. Only Mother knew but she pretended she didn't. 37

New generation demands for logic for each and everything. If you can satisfy their urge and reasoning they will follow you sincerely otherwise like Karuna, they will cheat you. Otherwise, if you will force them to follow such religious concept, you will indirectly push them to pretend before you.

In patriarchal set up, each girl or wife is expected to follow the schedule set by the father or husband which today wives or daughters do not like. De presents this attitude as-

"Our outings' were strictly *en famille* . Father decided and we followed. If he was feeling particularly out going, we'd make it to the beach, where we children would sit in a huddle, close to our parents, sipping coconut water and staring at the boys. Cinemas were out and so was film music. We woke up to the sounds of AIR bhajhans Mother was allowed to tune in to her favourite Lok Geet Programme of songs from popular 'drama's, but that was only during the hours father was away at work. I longed to listen to the Binaca Hit parade broadcast by Radio Ceylon but I had to satisfy myself by hoping the neighbors would turn their set up or that Father would choose that time to go for his bath. 'Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go', Elvis priestly would croon and I would go weak in the knees and kiss the world war Two radio over the book-case."³⁷

Thus customary set up shows that the marginalized section does not have liberty to enjoy it as it wishes. Such women are not free to go alone as and when wish to go at their chosen place. In the same way they cannot listen to songs or watch movie they like. Perhaps this is resulted as sometimes someone keeping the family members blind, enjoy her life as she wishes.

Traditional women never preferred to live alone. Not used to live without husband but now the trend is totally changed. They never feel themselves alone in their absence. On the contrary they seem enjoying their absence. It shows that sometimes their husband's too much association with them proves suffocating for them. For them marriage is a meaningless task. Total futile. In past it is considered as a sacred bond between the husband and wife, but here it is described as....

'What applied to sex applied to the marriage and I soon realized Mother had been right when, talking to me on the eve of the wedding. She'd said, 'Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It's just something to get used to'....Most of the woman I knew concurred with this viewpoint. We treated marriage like a skin allergy.... But these were our private worlds; inaccessible to the men we had married. I could spend hours in this world, even when the husband was around talking to me. There was a special thrill in switching off and pretending to be there listening while being lost in an universe created by me, for myself". 68

Modernized contemporary women want their husband to accompany them in enjoying their lives as they wish. For traditional women, as Shashi Deshpande says in 'That Long Silence', their husbands are 'Sheltering trees', husband is 'Parmeshvar'. In the novel De represents the modern attitude of the women about their husbands as....

When Anjali talked about her divorce to Abe, Karuna says, "I kept telling her to stick around Abe. 'You are used to him you know what he's all about. How are you sure you'll get a better deal with someone else? And look, what the other man did-ran a mile when he realized you meant business; she wasn't convinced. I even urged her to remain single for a while. 'I can't darling. I need a man. How will I go to the club alone? What about parties and plays and things? I hate to walk into a room without a man next to me. And then, no one will invite me without Abe... or someone."65 Otherwise, as Karuna further says, they like to live as a liberated woman who could have control over their lives. The changing reality of Mumbai as women worked, women married, women divorced, and women remained single has motivated Karuna with the fantasy of a liberated-woman which she starts love.

One more shocking details of the change in thinking of modernized women, De is giving is about to gain favour of husbands what they do. They behave wearing masks. To have their favour they make their husbands feel that they have done them a favour by marrying them. They let their husbands think that they are superior by giving their pretending support to them. On asking by Karuna, Anjali says, "It may seem horrible to you. But I don't think I'm doing anything dishonest. I'm not cheating him in any way. I look after his mother, his home, and his needs. Why shouldn't I expect something in return? If I didn't fulfill him in bed – he'd look elsewhere. Maybe go to a prostitute."She further says, "Love –shove is OK yaar. Of course I love him in my own way. I'm not looking at other men. And what is love? I do what he wants. Do you think I enjoy sex when I've got my chum?...I do it knowing that he knows I dislike it. This makes him feel grateful and guilty.... Be like me-pretend. Call your husband 'Darling, at least in front of his friends, pampers him in public. Press his feet sometimes. All these works like Jaadu". Not only this listening to all these Ritu, another female character said, "I realized here was a woman who had beaten the system. She got everything she wanted by making her husband grateful." 87

Reading these all don't you feel that there is Custom versus Contemporary Reality in the novel *Socialite Evenings*

nings!!!! Shobha has destroyed the distorted and deteriorated image of women and therefore, the female characters in the novel appear more powerful than men. She shatters the complementary image of a woman to man to highlight disharmony in marital relationship. No doubt, women need the company of male to satisfy their physical hungers and emotional support, but De's women are totally modernized. They easily establish their extra-marital affairs to come out from their marital boredom. They do not hesitate to use sex as a mean to earn their livelihood and social and financial benefits. For them marriage is a kind of social set-up, nothing more than this. It is completely devoid of emotional attachment, love and care of each other.

After reading this whole novel, we could also realize the universal truth that we have to live in reality accepting the all around truth. Taking revenge, playing game with other, wearing mask and so on, we can't precede further forever and sail in the boat for better, happy and satisfactory life. If we really want to be happy, male and female should equally honour and respect each other. Karuna's ending confession in the novel is an eyewitness of it. She says that single status of any woman can't give comfort to any woman. At the same time, if husband is not feeling and understanding his wife, he too is unable to comfort his spouse. Karuna says, "The crews weren't the only problem. At parties or other functions, if I didn't have an escort, men would zoom in hungrily-not because they found me irresistible-oh no- but because they imagined I was 'available.' One of them even said: 'But what have you to lose? You are a free bird'. Perhaps it didn't occur to these mutts that even free birds could be selective! I didn't find any of these men attractive- it was as simple as that. And though I felt guilty and sorry for mother as she worried herself silly over my single status, I wasn't about to relinquish the status for some cretin or weirdo. After all, even if may sound snide, I wasn't Anjali. Single was good for me. It was this attitude, stated one evening over a heady bottle of champagne at the Rendezvous that initiated something that has ruled my live this past year. He said: 'Is it usual or unusual for an Indian woman to feel this way?"

Don't know, I mean I haven't conducted a survey or anything. But off hand, I'd say it isn't the standard attitude. For instance, I can't think of a single school-friend in a similar situation-however good or bad it may be."305

Conclusion

A close study of the novel reveals De's protest against the good and ideal image of woman in the name of tradition or custom. She tries her best to describe here those all attitudes of the society which reveal the female section of the society oppressed and submissive. Then she moves to the requirement and expectations of the modernity, the impact of western culture which has made our woman full of woman consciousness and through that more bold and explosive. But in doing this, if any human being may be male or female tries to cross the moral boundaries, his or her status or image will be fractured. And at the cost of mental place and physical comfort he or she has to suffer a lot. So at last we see that to some extent her women characters do agree with the traditional code of conduct for women in the society. No doubt, they accept them with certain modifications as they wish.

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