

## Neo-rich Women in Shobha De's Socialite Evenings – A Feminist Approach



### Literature

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### ABSTRACT

*Shobha De is one of the most absorbing novelists whose works are a shocking revelation of the film world. Her work Socialite Evenings (1989) examines how the women break the traditional norms and how the society is westernized in the context of changing social values and customs. The novel portrays Karuna and Anjali, as women who are just a square peg in a round hole in the society of traditional conventions. One finds Karuna liking to live an extravagant life. So she chose Anjali as her role model, a socialite and the portal of the world to which she longs for. After marriage Karuna had to lead a submissive life, which she did not like. Soon she comes out of the marriage bond and decides to lead a financial independent life by creating an identity for her by acting in films and ads. She rises to the pinnacle of fame.*

The article attempts to focus on feminism as the central theme in *Socialite Evenings* (1989). Mary Wollstone Craft, a British writer, philosopher and the mother of feminism, in her *A vindication of the Rights of Woman with Structures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but only appear to be because they lack education. She suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason.

Feminism is a revolutionary global ideology. In India the revolutionary zeal of women was an indispensable part of our culture. In puranas Sita, Dhraupathi, savithri, Kannagi have fought and have succeeded well in the male dominated society. Now, a positive sense of feminine identity has found recognition and women are stepping out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally. Indian women novelists have concentrated on women's problems in their work and have given vent to a new approach to the consciousness of the emerging phenomenon. What was just a beginning in Indian writers like Anita Desai, assumed a strident posture in Shobha De and in others.

Shobha De is indeed one of the most absorbing novelists writing today. Her works are a shocking revelation of the film world where everyone wants to occupy the top position. She presents the abnormality of the film world, eccentric and sometimes, the selfish behavior of the stars: nothing escapes her. She presents them as she saw them, without attempting any refinement and so the final picture is coarse and shocking.

*Socialite Evenings* is her first novel. Karuna, the protagonist "born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra" (p. 9) finds her middle class life mundane and longs for an exciting life. This longing takes root in her when the family migrates to Bombay. Bombay is mind-boggling but to Karuna it is a perfect city that suits her extravagant life. Though the members of the family hate the city for the inconvenience, Karuna happily ventures forth in discovering the city in its extravaganza.

Karuna's dislike for the middle class society and her desire to live an extravagant life like the rich make her problematic and disobedient both at home and at school. She doesn't want to be an ordinary middle class girl. At home, she shows her rebellion by not jumping at the sound of her Father's voice, not putting her stuff away after school, leaving a dirty plate on the dining table, whistling in the bath room, backcombing and teasing her hair, refusing to fetch trays of tea for boring visitors, being cheeky with relatives and mainly not cowering in the presence of elders.

Karuna wants to be like the rich girls and since she cannot, she chooses to be different so that she can have the same attention enjoyed by the rich. At school, if the other girls could flash their fancy pencil-boxes and smart terrycot uniform, she will try and attract attention by wearing her sash hipster-style, hitching

the hem of her dress higher than was allowed and swaggering around the basket ball court like she owns it. The richness of the city and the high life of the people attract her more and she prefers to discover Bombay and Bombayites rather than show interest in her studies.

The submissive nature of Karuna's mother towards her father is one of the reasons for her hatred towards the middle class society. The middle class women are first under the control of their father, then their husbands and later their sons. Their whole life is controlled by someone or the other. They live for their parents or for their husbands or for their children but not for themselves. They do not have a life of their own. They have no time to think of themselves since all the time they worry about the comforts of the men folk. Karuna is against such a kind of subordinate life led by her mother. So it is natural that she revolts against the middle class life where a woman has no life of her own. Her father's anger towards her when her photograph appears in the newspaper for an ad makes her more rebellious. She doesn't want to be an obedient daughter like her sisters for she feels only the middle class girls obey their parents. She continues to work in ads. The first time father warns her. The second time he slaps her. Then the act of rebellion keeps the modeling going and she performs in more and more ads and the slapping stops as more ads appear and the father is helpless in controlling her disobedient and stubborn daughter.

When Karuna undergoes her college studies, she gets into contact with a socialite named Anjali. Since Anjali is the portal of the world to which she longs for, Karuna is not able to take away Anjali from her life. Anjali becomes her role model.

Karuna and Anjali have similar reasons in choosing a rich man as their life partners. Anjali, a half-Jain and half-Hindu, goes to the extent of changing her religion and marrying a rich Muslim, Abe, years older, only to realize her wishes like to be on her own, independent, see the world, meet people, buy lovely clothes and perfumes.

Karuna cancels her engagement with Bunty, a management trainee in a multinational firm "whose only disqualification was his ordinariness" (p. 56) and marries the man, a heir to a hundred-year-old export-import firm, an 'acceptable' male who "wouldn't take no for an answer" (p. 58). She feels her life would be different in the fashion world which can bring a life leading to wealth, freedom, status and mainly the fulfillment of her desires. Later she finds her husband to be "an average Indian husband" (p. 65). She is in utter bewilderment and disappointment because she is made to live a subordinate life like her mother. Her modeling stops and is made a dutiful wife listening to her husband's plans of the firm. He brainwashes her and makes her feel inferior and worthless. Karuna becomes very submissive and tries to accustom herself to her husband, like not arguing with him when he is unhappy and doing things the way he wants.

She feels passive and powerless and tries not to think about her needs. She is pushed to live her life just like her mother. She is merely a puppet in the hands of her dominating husband.

Karuna, in spite of her feeling desperately suffocated, tries to adjust with the husband. She even advises Anjali to stick around Abe or remain single because she will not get a good partner at that age. But Anjali divorces her husband and immediately starts her partner-hunting expedition. Kumar Bhandari is ready to take Anjali as his third wife.

In the Bombay society, women work, marry, divorce and remain single. It takes time for Karuna to come into that society. There arises an awakening in Karuna when the husband criticizes her as "a no-hoper" (p. 163) and "never amount to anything" (p. 163). She involves herself in theatre to change her husband's view. This involvement brings her closer to Krish, a married man and a friend of her husband. Her husband wants to divorce suspecting her paternity. She moves out and makes a life of herself. Here she differs from her mother. Karuna is able to come out of her marriage bond boldly unlike her mother. Her husband cheats her by not giving the alimony after the divorce. Karuna is also not interested in the alimony from her husband.

Even during the period when she had been divorced by her husband and had to move from place to place in search of a job, her attitude of being herself does not quite leave her. Her sole concern during this stage too is how she can shake off her middle-class background. Karuna's longing for an aristocratic life and her aim to live independently without any financial support from others make her work in the insecure world of freelancers.

Even in this state she tries to have an identity for herself in the society. So she really looks forward to acting. Girish, the film maker, who is impressed by Karuna's acting skill and perfor-

mance, plans to give her the main character role Shakuntala in his film 'Shakuntala', a contemporary version of the Kalidasa classic.

Apart from Girish's script, the firm Karuna worked for, bags the Ad club award for the Best Ad of the year, and Karuna gets an individual citation as Copywriter of the year. She is even invited to the Outlooks anniversary party which is considered more honourable. She graduates from writing to making ad films and is asked to script a major TV serial sponsored by a soft drink company. She is interviewed by 'The Washington Times' an American paper. Slowly she is raised to the pinnacle of fame.

Having realized that living alone also can give happiness, Karuna refuses the ex-husband, even though he grovels at her feet to come back to him. She refuses the proposal of Girish. She doesn't want marriage to be an obstacle in her career. Moreover, the earlier marriage and the bitterness of it have taught her not to have such horrible experiences any more in her life. She is not interested in having children also. She has the responsibility to look after her parents. She is confident enough to face the world alone without the support of anyone. She is earning as much as any man and she doesn't want to complicate her life by getting into a marriage.

Karuna doesn't want to depend on men in the future. She wants to be independent and wants to be praised and recognized by all. She doesn't want to be just an ordinary woman looking after the husband and the children. She steps out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally. She "carves out her own niche in the professionally competitive world of advertising and acquires all the resources" (Chandra, 2000, p. 147) and unlimited freedom necessary to live an independent life with no man to dictate terms.

## REFERENCE

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