

Gender and Social Annihilation of Women in Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*

Dr. Poonam Mor

Assistant Professor

Department of Languages and Haryanvi Culture

College of Basic Sciences and Humanities

CCSHAU, Hisar

Shobha De is a famous contemporary Indian novelist of English. Her world famous novel, *Second Thoughts* (1996) is about the psychological representation of Indian woman who keeps little expectation from her marriage though her commitment is more vital and major in her relationship with her husband. Shobha De exposes the sacrifice of woman for the upliftment of her family, however she is aware about the general self definition of a woman. The protagonist, Maya tries to find reasons of sacrifices a woman makes for the sensible proceeding of a family.

Maya experiences her first Bombay monsoon and enjoys it. Though it is depressing her, she actually surrenders to the monsoon's many moods. But the rains put Ranjan into a bad temper as his promotion is due for later in the year which is obviously weighing on his mind. Recently, he acquires a new boss, Tom, an American whiz, all at twenty-nine. In this connection, she starts giving references about his job what she reads from 'Time' magazine. He raises his voice impatiently: "Maya-it's better for women not to make immature, ignorant comments on subjects they know nothing about" (115). It reveals the restrictions imposed on the freedom of women in expressing their opinions by husbands. Later, she suggests calmly that he should invite his boss home to dinner for which he agrees to it. He is happy that his Calcutta wife is not entirely ignorant about things around the world. When the doorbell rings at precisely 8.30 p.m., Ranjan straightens his shoulders to invite his boss, Tom Becker II. He has a peculiar way of talking to and greeting foreigners in English. Tom looks at her admiringly commenting that she wears a lovely coloured Bengali sari. At the dinner table, he tells Maya that he likes Indian food as he is sick of those entire five star curries. When she feels slightly embarrassed, he comforts her that she will introduce him to Bengali food the next time. The dinner that follows is dominated by Ranjan's office matters. From time to time, Tom catches her eye and smiles. She is not sure whether or not to return his smile, since it may look like disloyalty to Ranjan. After dinner, Tom follows her into the Kitchen praising that the dinner is excellent. In reply,

she whispers he is a liar. In response, he tells that he wants to relish the real dinner during his next visitation. Later, after Tom leaves, Ranjan asks her whether Tom likes her dinner. She answers that Tom likes it very much and he wants to visit their home again. Ranjan is very much delighted with the news; he keeps repeating it to himself. This instance shows how the husband imparts more importance to his career rather than his wife.

The first time Ranjan goes out of town on business, and then Maya wishes to take the next train back to Calcutta as she is horrified at the thought of being alone in an impersonal Bombay flat. When she expresses like so, he assures that it is a pretty safe building and Pushpa as well as her neighbours take care of her. He is elated at the prospect of a five star, ten day trip. She also feels the same way while she is watching glazed pictures of a foreign resort in a magazine. One afternoon, when she lies on her bed flipping channels, she watches an enthralling image on the screen in which a man and woman are swimming like playful dolphins in blue waters. She finds her cheeks wet with tears, when she can figure out herself with the woman in the orange bikini and Nikhil, as her underwater companion. Her occasional cravings include an unending sadness in her, as she knows that will never materialize either with Ranjan or with Nikhil. She sits around dully, having a feeling of relief in his absence which she should not feel. This guilt that possesses in her is horrible. She feels: "Was I really such an uncaring, cold and selfish person? Why was I not longing for my husband's return like a loyal, loving wife?" (163). Ranjan has his follies, but he is not an evil man. Then she goes out onto the balcony to get some fresh air. Alka Saxena in her article, "*Second Thoughts: A Slice of Urban Life*" comments:

Freedom is permitted in a very restricted manner; it is the ancient story of sacrifice and adjustment that a woman is destined to. Sooner or later she learns to adjust, as there is no other alternative, if she needs to live a respectful life. Maya, too, accepts to remain enveloped in the loneliness and sadness. On second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Bombay, but also of her marriage. (The Fiction of Shobha De, 271)

Though Indian men and women begin to adopt the changing trends in the society, it is an obligation for them to act within the wheel of traditional customs. It is observed that women long for companionship when their physical urges are unfulfilled.

When the bell rings once again, there is Nikhil who is whistling tunelessly at the door step. Nikhil asks her to come for a ride with him to undo dullness. In response, she goes into her bedroom and changes a fresh sari. She is firm to get out of the house anyway and find out she is still in love with Bombay. The heat is far less oppressive riding on the saddle off Nikhil's motorbike. Surprisingly, she is neither weighed down with guilt nor does she want to think about the consequences. But this is the outing she longs for ever since the day she has arrived and felt Bombay as hers. Nikhil is quiet on the way home; when they reach their building he asks Maya where she wants to alight. She jumps off the bike about half a kilometre from her house. In another article, "Realism: Lifelike characters", L Sonia Ningthoujam states: "Second Thoughts is the only De novel which sketches the life of the higher middle class and in the character of Maya presents woman who apparently conforms to the norms of the society but secretly breaks them when she finds them unjust and unacceptable" (Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De, 99).

Maya is the replica of all those Indian middle class women in the urban context where they rebel against the male macho that confines them to boundaries of their homes without allowing them to accomplish their desires. Maya's flirtations with Nikhil rejuvenate her spirits beyond measure. Nikhil's shadowy figure rolling on and off his battered bike continues to dominate Maya's thoughts. She recollects how he appears once unexpectedly as always, waving in her face. Ranjan. G.D. Barche in his article, "Maya: Another Eve in Second Thoughts" asserts: We see particularly with regard to projecting the psyche of an Indian married woman who is caught and crushed between the nature- culture wheels on the one hand, and pulled apart by the centrifugal acts of Ranjan, her husband and those of centripetal of Nikhil, her lover, on the other. (The Fiction of Shoba De, 280) The predicament of Indian middle class woman reflects the conflicts of female psyche as she is oppressed in the hands of her husband who never allows her to enjoy the freedom all through her life.

When Maya gets injured as she misses seeing Iron wire lying across the living room floor falls over Ranjan's bag. Ranjan sits next to her and presses an icepack on her injured elbow. Then she comes to the realization that he marries her to satisfy his mother and she marries him to get away from Calcutta. They are locked together in a relationship that does not satisfy either of them. Priya Wanjari in her article, "De-Analysis of Marital Relationships" criticizes: "The husband-wife relationship in Second Thoughts is in no way different from the one expressed in the earlier novels.

Though all kinds of necessary things for a successful life are available in the family, both husband and wife drift away in different directions” (Contemporary Fiction: An Anthology of Female Writers, 201).

Here Ranjan utterly fails in understanding the physical needs of his wife. He makes her feel so ashamed of herself for possessing such thoughts. She wonders what Ranjan does to satisfy his desires. When she reaches out for him, he objects saying that he needs rest after a hectic tour. Ranjan thinks that he is providing everything to his wife. He is providing material things. She desires personal care, tenderness, affection, emotional expressions and romantic feelings. Nikhil is also not providing all that but he is only an opportunist exploiting her. She feels depressing in her heart and reveals her plight:

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. Maya’s parents no longer thought I belonged to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I didn’t have a single true friend to call my own. (266)

It is observed that women resort to extramarital relations when their carnal pleasures are completely neglected by their husbands. As a result, they protest against the social customs to satiate their self. L Sonia Ningthoujam in her article, “Traditional Woman Versus Modern Woman: A Study of Shobha De’s Novels” says: “Maya’s frustration and her rebellious nature cannot allow her to take her husband’s indifference lying down. Maya decides to seek the fulfilment of her dreams elsewhere, however sinful it might be” (Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De, 40). In order to escape from the dry experience in her married life, she follows her heart to accomplish her dreams. When Maya is involved in a sexual encounter with Nikhil, she forgets herself having lost her original identity. She admits: “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.” (268) In her newly awakened state, she is dying to be with Nikhil again so that she craves to share her feelings with him. She prays God to make Nikhil hers, though she never believes Him. In the struggle to find a solution to her inevitable problems some women get involve in promiscuity, but they never realize that they have been exploited by another man at the expense of her life. It is observed that women break all the bonds and rules that delimit their freedom to fulfil their dreams and desires.

The next ten days Maya plays the entirely unused role of full-time nursemaid to her mildly ailing mother-in-law. Between her sick-bed duties and routine domestic chores, she does not have a single moment for herself. Each and every action of hers involves Nikhil in some way. She is alive to every aspect of living because she knows she has Nikhil in her life. It is at around eight that night when she is making a chicken soup, Nikhil's mother, Pushpa comes with sweets in her hand announcing that Nikhil's marriage is arranged and he gets a seat in Rochester university. Maya is completely shocked to hear this. Now she has nowhere to go but has to start from scratch.

In the upper class families of the urban society, the woman has little patience to bear the passive and cold attitude of her husband. Hence she takes the resort of second thoughts to satisfy urges of her inner self. In the case of Maya, she soothes her inner self under the canopy of Nikhil's presence. Unfortunately, she feels Nikhil as her true lover. In the pursuit of searching for the husband substitute, she loses her husband, Ranjan to some extent.

Thus, Shobha De wants to reveal the fact that the longings of a woman should be answered in the wedlock. Every woman must know her position in her family. It is the necessary for a husband to look into the psychological and physical needs of his wife. Both the partners need to understand the importance of honesty, trust, respect and above all fidelity. The lack of any of the quality can led to break down of the beautiful bond that is marriage.

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