

Socialized Emotions: Reflections on Sobha De's Socialite Evenings

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on socialized emotions which control a woman's life entirely in Sobha De's novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989). Sobha De is an eminent novelist and columnist of contemporary India. She mainly deals with the issues concerning modern society and her main concern is on the different facets of the urban Indian society. The themes of her novels reveal how she has been enthusiastically engaged in bringing about a radical social change and demanding recognition of the women's position and potentiality in the development of the human society. *Socialite Evenings* is her maiden novel and it has been critically acclaimed and considered as a masterpiece in the realm of feminism. The novel is about the protagonist Karuna who undergoes all kinds of socialized emotions like gender discrimination, inequality, taboos of arranged marriage etc. Unlike her mother, she rejects all kinds of injustice and is able to pass from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion and from weakness to strength.

Key words: Arranged marriage, freedom, gender discrimination, inequality, self-assertion,

In Indian society emotions are socialized. Because of dichotomy between male and female, their roles are ordained socially by the people from the ancient times. Some of the socialized emotions are gender discrimination, arranged marriage, patriarchy, widowhood etc. which have undergone radical changes due to the industrial advancements, modern lifestyle and capitalistic attitude and these affect the individual's attitudes towards the basic relationships and these emotions are picturesquely portrayed by the women novelists in their writings.

Contemporary novelists like Sobha De conjure up the world through their novels. George Gerbner opines in his "Why the Cultural Environment Movement?" by saying that much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate physical environment...stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle, and offer models of conformity or targets for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs. (19)

Sobha De is more realistic and down to earth, perhaps more sophisticated in her stand for empowerment of women. She depicts careerist women who are more cautious in using men to assert feminine desire and sexuality, gender awareness and self-definition, existence and destiny. The women characters in her novels are economically independent and socially uninhabited; they are competitive, professional and stand on equal footing with men who are equally a source of sexual enjoyment, security and luxury.

Socialite Evenings (1989) is Shobha De's maiden novel which discusses the story of Karuna, a prominent Bombay socialite. In Indian society a boy is given a lot of freedom whereas the girl is expected to fulfil all the expectations that are placed upon her. It is not only appearance but also her character must be shaped so that it matches the prospective husband's wishes. The girl is supposed to be meek and malleable without any trace of assertion even though she is educated. But Karuna is different as she doesn't like to go to school by train or a double decker bus, follows her sash hipster-style and prefers to discover Bombay and Bombayites. As an educated woman she strongly protests to follow the traditional path and wants to identify with the outside world. She says:

In the house- not jumping at the sound of Father's voice booming out some command. Not putting my stuff away after school. Leaving a dirty thali on the dining table, whistling in the bathroom, backcombing and teasing my hair, refusing to fetch trays of tea for boring visitors, being cheeky with relatives and, mainly, not cowering in the presence of elders. (SE 6-7)

In patriarchy, marriage is a destiny and it is considered as a societal necessity for woman as it is expected to provide physical and emotional security to her. Family, in Indian society, is established after marriage, which is an institution that permits a man and a woman to have children and a suitable marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life and the main responsibility of her parents. The traditional heritage of India gives immense importance to the family, attributing to its historical, cultural and sociological significance and also emphasizes on the equal responsibility of a husband and wife. Due to the difference in the physical make, husband is deemed to be the provider and wife is considered to be the homemaker. Unfortunately, this role of a woman has led to the establishment of her conventional idealized identity.

The women like Karuna's mother have subordinate status in the society for they accept passively everything that comes to them by fate or tradition. Karuna's traditional mother advises Karuna to marry the right person. A woman cannot live alone; it is not safe. Her mother says:

A woman cannot live alone. It is not safe. We are here today-but who knows about tomorrow? A woman needs a man's protection. Society can be very cruel...a woman's real place is in her husband's house-not in her parents'-Take your time but marry, And marry the right one-that is important.. Before we die, we want to see you secure and at peace. (S E 275-76)

According to *Manu Smrti or Manu Samhita*, a woman should depend upon a man from her cradle to grave and should never live as an independent entity:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she had no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband, in default, upon those of her father, if she had no paternal kinsmen, upon the Sovereign, a woman must never govern herself as she likes. (Qtd. Boder 55)

Karuna opines that no longer in the Indian society, the institution of marriage carries with it the traditional sense of security. As Karuna questions:

But, mother why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much money as any man, I have a roof over my head. I don't really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself, I'm not answerable to anyone... I can't make any "sacrifices" – not now. (S E 276)

Karuna's marriage too lacked the vitality which she had expected and very soon she found that her world was quite different from that of her husband's. Having realised that she has been locked up in a fragile and futile marital knot, she fails to get the required emotional support from her husband. Her incompatible unhappy married life leads her to boredom. She further points out to her husband that his failure to understand her as a woman is the real cause of her unusual and unacceptable behaviour. Karuna's condition is like that of Saroja in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind mem* (1996) in which her husband, Vishwa Moorthy is a man who has no feeling to spare for her.

He is like a dried-out lemon peel whose energies have already been squeezed out caring for a sick mother, worrying about his sisters, inheriting his dead father's unfinished duties. It ate up his youth. (TM 216)

Theodor Reik says in his book *Many Faces of Sex: Observation of an Old Psychoanalyst*:

Why do we men not understand women even though they give us so much material by which to know them? We see them, we hear them, we even smell them, but all this is not enough because we can never be women. We always conclude that women understand men, but men don't understand women. It is a one-way traffic (102).

And at this stage that she meets and develops extra-marital relationship with Krish, an old friend of her husband. In the beginning, Karuna tries to adjust and make a compromise to save her marriage. But her open rebellion comes forth when she admits her extra-marital relations just in front of her husband. She tells her husband very frankly:

I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him – in Venice. There is a good chance that I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. May be he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me in which case it will really be A Death in Venice. You know by now that I am not the flighty sort. I don't flirt at random like my other friends. I am steady and grounded. It is the Taurean in me that is surfacing these days. Treat this as a short-term mania that will wear itself out – and then we can go back to business as usual. (SE178)

Henceforth, she indulges in promiscuous sex, and makes her husband either to tolerate or ignore it. She openly accepts her deviant behaviour and challenges her husband. Even she goes a step further by giving divorce to her husband. She decided to lead a single life because she wanted to assert her individuality. The struggle of Karuna, therefore, does not remain confined only to her but becomes representative struggle of the modern women to be free and self-reliant.

After her divorce, her husband meets her to express his regret and ask her to come back and live with him. He is prompted to visit her by the typical patriarchal understanding

and expectation regarding women's response in such situations. It is traditionally believed that finally woman ignores the cruelties of her husband as she thinks he has certain privileges over her. But Karuna's response is shocking and unexpected because she firmly asks her husband to go away. It is a powerful jolt to the patriarchal man. She even verbally abuses her husband when he comes with the proposal to remarry her:

'And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don't ever want to see you again. I let you in this time – but never again. I will call the cops if you try and invade my house in future. You are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie – I hope she has got a wax doll of yours. I will send her some extra pins to stick into it. Now take your frigging pipe and OUT !!' (SE 256-57)

Thus Karuna reacts and rejects the idea of her second marriage. She refuses to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore that is why she rebels against the patriarchal system. Her attitude shows that it is her strong desire for the affirmation of herself. But she is a lone rebel who passes from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, and from weakness to strength.

Sobha De through this novel has meticulously and consciously delineated the man-woman relationship and shows how the inroad of science, technology and industry brings a lot of changes and impact socialized emotions in Indian life and family system.

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