

THE PLIGHT OF MODERN WOMEN IN SHOBHA DE'S *SECOND THOUGHTS*

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, there have been very rigid social customs formulated by the patriarchal Indian society wherein the women have been forced to undergo marginalization and displacement. This theme has been prominent through Maya, the protagonist of ShobhaDe's *Second Thoughts* novel. When compared to other protagonists of ShobhaDe's novels, Mayatends to be different. This is due to the dual personality prevailing within her. In life, she is between devil and deep sea. On one side, there is her over-bossing attitude of her mother and on the other side she is faced with the conventional tradition bound concepts and values which emphasize on women being relegated to the backyards of their houses. Over a period of time, she becomes a passive introvert. Despite the odds faced by her in life, there has been a lurking ambition in her mind to be unique in her approach and attitude as well as attain success in life. This ambition makes her rebel against the male superiority. When marriage with Ranjan proves to be a futile exercise for her, she is impelled to lead an illusionary life. In the deepest layers of her mind, there has been a desire to decry the traditional practices and values and lead a life of her own. Yet, in reality, she has not been able to break the shackles of life. She lives in an illusionary world and dreams about Nikil being her knight in a shining armour ready to rescue her from distress. Being a daring woman, she has enough mental strength to reconsider her married life as well as Mumbai city which has been sultry to her. She is able to have a dating with reality in the end and attain peace in life. The article titled "The Plight of Modern Women in ShobhaDe's *Second Thoughts*" attempts to highlight the plight of Maya, the modern woman in a patriarchal society in ShobhaDe's novel, *Second Thoughts*.

Key words: plight, reality, patriarchal society, illusion, oppression, lurking ambition.

In her novel *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De has been able to bring forth the female suppression and displacement experienced by majority of Indian women in a traditional Indian society which is predominantly a male dominated one. Maya, the protagonist of the novel expresses her displeasure and raises her rebellious voice against orthodox practices prevailing in the society. By and large, the protagonists of Shobha De have exhibited their rebellious tendency towards the patriarchal setup in the society. Maya does not join this majority. Through her character, the author has been able to bring forth the factual portrayal of female oppression in its true intensity. Here, Maya is only a living object. The novel *Second Thoughts* gives a factual account of the hollowness and hypocrisy found in almost all traditional marriages in India and the same is given an effective verbal expression by Shobha De. In a male dominated society, a woman has been at the receiving end of all kinds of oppression, right from childhood to adulthood. The illusions nurtured by womenfolk get fragmented into pieces and it forms the crux of the novel *Second Thoughts*.

In the novel, Maya has been the female protagonist representing the traditional Indian women who are accursed to follow all customs and beliefs all through their lives. Maya, though being an individual, is unable to tread on her own path. In the childhood, it is her parents who act as stumbling blocks in ruining all her dreams. In the later stage, it is the society and her spouse who prove to be her undoing. Due to the hostile environment confronted by her since her childhood, there develops a dual personality within her. She turns out to be an introvert due to the centuries' old customs and practices making a woman to be passive as well as her over domineering mother. Unlike others, Maya has been blessed with a desire to be on her own and be unique as well as achieve something in life. This tendency makes her different from others in raising her voice against male supremacy. Due to this attitude, she becomes sensitive to all kinds of female subordination.

Due to her continuous suffering, Maya creates an illusionary world where she discharges her pent up feelings. Outwardly, the readers will find Maya to be an obedient child to her parents. On the contrary, it is her inner self that is getting fragmented into pieces. It is used to be a practice in the society where a woman is expected to confine herself to the four walls of her house. In the words of Gupta, "whatever may be the intensity of the tortures undergone by them,

girls have to keep everything within the four walls of the house lest the family honour should be at stake' (149).

In an ideal married life, both husband and wife are expected to experience satisfaction and fulfillment in physical, mental and emotional aspects. In spite of it, in a patriarchal society, a woman is expected to be subservient to her husband and he has all rights to wield his will over his wife. Literally, a woman ceases to be an individual and becomes an object in a married life. In fact, she becomes the other in a phallogocentric man's life. Maya joins this majority of married women.

Ranjan is quite contrary to Maya's expectations. All her dreams and aspirations are shattered by her husband. Although he is an American return who has successfully established a career in a bank, Ranjan has been very orthodox in his approach and proves to be a male chauvinist in all matters pertaining to his wife. Maya experiences a very pathetic and hostile situation in her married life.

Maya is treated with utmost contempt by her husband Ranjan. He never considers her as a fellow human being with feelings and emotions. She is kept as a caged bird which has been severely restricted in its movement and forbidden from using all household comforts. There is an aura of male dominance in all aspects of her domestic life. It is the patriarchal society which has reduced woman to a state of a living object. Her identity is understood only as a 'being for itself'. In this context, it has been accurately observed by Virginia Woolf that "imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant" (10).

Being an egoist individual, Ranjan wields his authority over his wife by making her dance to his tune and forcefully taking away her freedom and self respect. He derives a sadistic pleasure in denying her the possibility to live in her dream city. It makes Maya pine and say that, "If only he'd be more enthusiastic about sharing his city with me"(97). Saxena states the sorry state of affairs of Maya as: ' It troubles her (Maya) to see that Ranjan refuses to share a single aspect of his life with her. She wonders whether he considers her his rival or does not have enough faith in her (...). Under the same roof, they live as strangers. (265)

The married life of Maya proves to be hollow, ineffectual and devoid of mutual love. She loses the zest for life and becomes a recluse. She understands in a tragic manner that marriage is an institution forcing women to “aimless days indefinitely repeated , life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose ” (Beauvoir 500) . In the inner part of her mind, Maya completely loathes the age old customs and wishes to part ways with her husband Ranjan. Though in her imaginary world she is able to part ways with her husband, in reality, she is unable to break the shackles of marriage.

Maya has an insatiable desire to express herself and make her life meaningful by undertaking a career. Her long cherished desires in life get punctured by her husband due to her ego-centered, male- chauvinistic life partner. She is made to wonder, “how lucky she was to be outside. In the midst of people earning for herself and nurturing another life” (87). Maya starts living in an illusionary world when she is unable to make peace in real life. She develops a relationship with her college going neighbor named Nikhil. Saxena vividly describes the mental condition of Maya as :

“ Maya is constantly depressed because of her crippling loneliness. There is no one in Bombay with whom she can share her miseries. She pities herself for doing nothing in a city that is not her own. There is no chance with whom she can giggle or confess her problems. She feels useless. The feeling of being unwanted gnaws her. (266).

Maya nurtures a desire to become significant to someone in life and is in the lookout for such an individual who is kind and considerate to her. She is unable to get liberated from her mental trauma caused due to her frustrated married life. Her married life is thick with loneliness and confusion. Her frustrations reach to a point of no return and she tries to seek revenge on her husband by entering into an amorous relationship with Nikhil. Nikhil happens to be a perfect foil to Ranjan. Unlike Ranjan, he appreciates the appearance of Maya. Maya slowly starts enjoying his company. She likes his frank attitude as well as remarks. A significant change takes place in her. She feels as though she has been engulfed by a new spirit. Nikhil recognizes, accepts and appreciates Maya. Due to these, Maya breaches the *LakhsmanRekha* of married life .

In her illusionary world, Nikhil happens to be a knight in a shining armour ready to rescue her from distressed married life. Nikhil brings a ray of fresh air in the life of Maya and she finds a meaning in her existence. Maya's proximity with Nikhil rekindles her dreams and desires. Nikhil takes her to Mumbai, her dream city and it makes her go bonkers with extreme happiness.

In her married life with Ranjan, she had seen only closed doors and ironed window bars. All along she craved for leading a life in Mumbai and Nikhil takes her to her dream place. Her adventurous spirit comes out in full fury. She gets a firsthand experience with the exotic locales, imposing buildings and azure blue swimming pools. She gets inundated with the excitement of city life.

Nikhil is deceptive enough to exploit the precarious condition of Maya. He understands fully that his amorous relationship with Maya cannot go on forever as Maya is married. With this intention, he readily accepts his mother's suggestion to marry a girl of her choice. This fragments the heart of Maya as she finds her ideal lover ready to accept the hand of another girl.

The author enables the readers to know more about the attitude of Nikhil and many like him who have an indifferent attitude towards marriage. He belongs to the present generation youth who are ready to have one night sleep with married woman. Even for him, when it comes to marriage, it has to be necessarily an arranged one. It is Nikhil's mother Pushpa who conveys the information that her son is getting engaged to a girl of her choice. It is an ironical situation here. Maya is day dreaming about her wonderful relationship with Nikhil whereas Nikhil is found to be wooing his would-be bride at Delhi.

The sudden shift of allegiance from Nikhil makes Maya to "wallow in her misery" (165). Her joyful relationship with him proves to be short lived. She is benumbed and is devoid of any emotions. Her mind is clogged with fear and her self confidence ebbs out. Maya is not sure about the flirting attitude of Nikhil with other married women. As she felt happiness in his company, she did not take care to probe about his attitude towards women. In the true sense, Nikhil has a record of the travel plans of various husbands and the list of bored wives. Maya happens to be one more in the lengthy list of these women. Nikhil is always in the lookout for disappointed women experiencing boredom in their family life. He takes advantage of their

weaknesses and it used to be mostly one night affairs for him. The moment his mother suggests a prospective bride for him, he yields to her request immediately. His playboy attitude towards women is a kind of male chauvinism exhibited against them. Maya is quite naïve in taking decisions even after experiencing cruelty at the hands of male chauvinists like Ranjan and Nikhil. She lacks will power and courage to step out of the traditional married life. Yet, she is able to understand that , “ there is no escape route in a tightly organized tradition bound society” (Jacob 31). After moving from one crisis to the other, Maya finally becomes determined to control her life on her own and it itself is a kind of self assertion. Now, her past experiences have chastened her a lot and she is able to study her married life in a different perspective. She is ready to overcome the sultriness of Mumbai city as well as her personal life. During her college days , she used to be a vibrant girl who nurtured dreams about “ becoming a journalist and changing the world” (141). She is able to make a compromise with reality where she may not be averse to make a fresh beginning in life with her husband for she has, “ all the time in the world now” (289). Therefore, Maya acquires the ability to get rid of the illusionary part of her life and shake hands with reality.

The novels of Shobha De have mostly been set in urban places and her novels talk about contemporary issues. The novel *Second Thoughts* is a perfect example for realizing the traditional aspect of Indian men and women. Outwardly, these men and women adore and practice modern customs, yet, in the dark recess of their hearts, they esteem the traditional practices and customs. The lifestyle of Indian men and women has not undergone any drastic change. Like what Milton stated in the *Paradise Lost Book IX*, “Hee for God only, shee for God in him”, the men are still the masters of married life and the women still play subservient roles to their husbands.

The novel ends in an abrupt manner. The success of Shobha De is felt in the diligent manner in which she expresses the tension emerging due to the inability of Indian women in combating conservatism and liberalism in domestic life. The novel gives a vivid account of male chauvinism, indifferent view about liberated women in the society, sexual, familial and individual issues . Though Maya goes away from her husband due to lonely life without any identity for her, she returns to her husband like a prodigal son. She understands that any extramarital affair will not give her solace and comfort. Hence, her vainglorious relationship

with Nikhil proves to be a chastening experience and finally she meets peace in the company of her husband much like traditional Indian women.

The novel *Second Thoughts* has been successful in portraying the pathetic conditions of the modern Indian women who have been inundated in the maze of domestic chores and are forced to take unwise decisions so as to attain individuality and identity. Here, Maya is a modern woman who dares to face the consequences arising out of her decisions. She demands not equality, but to be acknowledged as an individual –capable of intelligence and feelings. Therefore, the new women have been different in the manner in which they rebel against the normal customs of patriarchal society and try to explore their real identity as well as fulfill their demands.

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