



Self-Realization: A Journey from Innocence to Experience in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

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Abstract

Shobha De's first novel *Socialite Evenings* has the core message of feminist identity and independence. The novel tells the story of Karuna, the protagonist, attempting to get away from the terrifying of a shattered marriage, unsuccessful affiliation. The central theme of the novel is a powerful condemnation of women for self-identity and to fight male chauvinism. The novel moves around Karuna and her friends Anjali, and Ritu who long for liberty and power. The marginalization of women at the hands of their husbands is unfolded clearly by the novelist.

Key words: feminist identity, male chauvinism, marginalization, self-realization

The novel revolves around the protagonist, Karuna, and her friend Anjali in the main plot whereas the subplot revolves around Ritu. Karuna tries to escape into her past from the nightmarish present life of hers. She wants to forget her shabby condition due to 'an unhappy divorce and succession of sordid affairs' which take place in her life and make her over because she is not ready to accept the middle-class metamorphoses, which shows her ignorance, inexperience because of her lack of guidance and ill effects of glamour on her mind. Though she deviates throughout her life, in the end, she realizes that "I know, I'm on to a good thing and the good thing is me (306) which eased her from all mortal weakness.

In the novel one could see three stages in Karuna's life: "before marriage, married life, life

after divorce from her husband". She remains displeased with all these three stages of life. Since her inquisitiveness gave way to uncertainty and finally to recognition but that took an entire decade. Soon after her return from the USA, she felt "I need my own space. I need to find myself". (57) But the glamorous life of Mumbai has its hypnotic effects upon her and she finds herself lost once again in the morbid atmosphere.

In the first stage of her life, one could find the condemnation of her middle-class origins. However, she fails to get rid of a feeling of emptiness in life. She is a knotty child both at home and at school. Her hunger to be in with the mod crowd increases as she grew up and she desperately longs to be in 'that charmed circle of rich girls who have everything.' During her school days, she was terribly

self-conscious and resented her middle-class origins and the shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle – rung government official even though she got enough attention and affection from her parents and sisters. She feels:

I wanted to be different because I wasn't rich.... All I did was fret and hunger for things I didn't have... My hunger was great and it grew greater by the day for it was never fed. It didn't comfort me much that I was not only middle-class student in the class. (9)

This unfed starvation to be the clever and exquisite sect, and her feeble state to attain this, her embarrassment, her awareness that no one can recognize her feelings make her behave in a different way. She isn't always equipped to cower before elders at home and she loses attention in studies too. She and her friends are thrown out of their class for their misdemeanors. This makes her parents get bewildered.

Karuna maintains her feminine psyche throughout the novel and her sense of freedom and liberty make her rebel against her father and patriarchy and opt for the job of modelling without seeking permission from anybody. Karuna meets Anjali, a model who was the threshold to the big world of fashion designing and advertising. The gorgeous appearance of Anjali makes an incredible impact on Karuna. Anjali assists Karuna at every step. Karuna becomes harder, stronger in her desire and determination against patriarchy, to fend females and femininity, for equality. Karuna takes a remarkable decision of modelling without informing her father despite her mother's caution.

Karuna starts off evolved searching out things which she doesn't get in her home, but her hunger and quest grew greater day by day for it was never fed perhaps because of the negligence of her parents and unwariness of instructors. Karuna feels impelled to establish herself as an independent model. She also gathered sufficient cash for her virgin trip overseas, free from all strings and impacts either from the circle of family, father or Anjali. Karuna, for the first time, in her life feels, 'adventurous and liberated'. Karuna dominates the

patriarchy; in addition, she attempts to 'search' her 'identity'. Karuna herself emphasizes this while she says about her courageous new international trip that via it "I was going to discover about myself". Karuna loses her virginity in her virgin journey. The Sindhi stranger assists her to cancel her choice of an unofficial engagement and marriage plan with Bunty, her loving, affectionate, accommodating boyfriend. On her return from the U.S.A., she firmly, convincingly and in an unrecognized voice instructs him not to disturb her privacy. "You KNOW – SPACE _ I need my own space. I feel claustrophobic. I need to find myself". (55)

Later, to escape from her ennui, she decides to get married to a beau, who proposes to her in a restaurant, not well familiar with her. Karuna with her fanciless marriage "pushed herself by an acceptable male who wouldn't take no for an answer", (58) which makes her life even either, meaningless and boring, due to lack of communication. To get out of this problem, she diverges in search of identity, delight, communication and belongingness. The worst part of Karuna's life starts with the sudden problem of pregnancy. This issue makes a dispute between Karuna and her husband. He not only disowns the unborn child, as he blusters his way out of this difficult situation by saying, "It cannot be mine anyway"! (215) Because he has no more 'trust' in her any longer due to her affair with Krish who was introduced by her husband to Karuna at a party in Ajali's house. Her ignorance and inexperience ultimately bring her divorce. This gives Karuna a second opportunity to know about herself, her mind, her motto and the way of the world.

After divorce, Karuna decides to lead a trouble-free, lonely but meticulously independent life in the final stage. Her childhood innocence and rest for life revive her from her physical and mental illness in the caring company of her mother who was earlier disowned by her. Karuna undergoes a transformation in her character and nature, which is the direct outcome of self-realization; the resurrection of identity, hope and belongingness. When she is in the grip of poverty, Krish tries to entrap her once again through a new offer, but Karuna who has learnt a lot through her life and

experience rejects the offer. Karuna is able to resurrect herself by her hard labour. She rejects a prestigious offer to act in the film titled *Shakuntala* (modern version), which was being directed by a noted film director Mr. Girish Shridhar. The gossip news published in the newspaper that Karuna is having 'an affair with, father, Girish Sridhar and his son Kunal Sridhar upsets her. She is further confused when Kunal comes to her and conveys his father's desire to marry her. However, she declines the offer of the marriage for the time being. Karuna now does some introspection, which is a great help in unravelling her own personality and thus fix priorities for life.

Karuna has been working for a firm, which bagged the Ad Club award individually, an individual citation as a copywriter of the year. She is suggested to go full time and professionalize in the advertising business, as her market is up. But she resists the persuasion as her preference has changed, "It wasn't money or success I was looking forwards to in my life" but "it is the freedom to do what I wanted", (273-274) which she very easily gets through her part-time job. This shows that at long last she has come to have some serious purpose in life and that is, herself. She is sincerely advised by her mother to marry, "Take your time but marry. And marry the right one___ that is important... a woman needs a man's protection, a woman's real place is in her husband's home___ not in her parents". (275) Karuna, however, finds herself far more secure and at peace in her present condition. She questions her mother "Why does [a woman's] security rest with a man"? (276) She tells her mother very plainly that she can look after herself, as she has a roof over her head and she was earning equal to a man, "I'm at peace with myself. I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. I can't make any 'sacrifices'___ not now". (276)

Varma, a very powerful editor of the *Outlook* disparages her character to deprecate her. Karuna insults him saying, "How dare you. I'm not afraid of your threats. You can bloody well go ahead and print what you wish". (279) This incident shows, with the passages of time, her self-confidence has developed. The same self-confidence is obvious in her dealings with an America based NRI Randhir Roy

a roving correspondent of *The Washington Times*. She castoffs a productive proposal from him to figure in a documentary on the theme of "the *desi* lib movement" (305) on dowry death.

Anjali, who remains an ideal and idol for Karuna from her teens to her present state of maturity and overflowing self-confidence, is always in a mess due to ignorance and her love for the life of senses. Owing to her loveless unhappy marital life with Abe, her husband, she gets divorced from him. She feels that she cannot face the world alone without a man by her side. So, she remarries Mr. Kumar, a 'homo'. By doing so she commits the mistake for the second time. Anjali's desire to lead a proper married life with a proper husband and a home get annoyed. At last, she turns to spiritualism and religion to seek out relief from her unexciting existence. She finds peace and love through her faith in religion and realizes her 'self'. Anjali is one character in the novel, running from pillar to post searching for peace and happiness, but they elude her grasp.

Dazzling and energetic Ritu, another important character, leaves her second husband for a smuggler Gul and becomes his procurer, picking up virgins for him and his friends. She is a sadomasochist and has the excellence to persuade men of all ages. She has firm faith in manipulating 'Sex' and advises Karuna to enjoy "a boring husband in the home and an exciting lover on the sidelines-perfect. . . can have both"(173) and inspires her to take a couple of hard decisions. She does not understand the difference between a wife and a mole-like Anjali which ultimately turned her life nightmarish. Ritu, by the time, feels that the life she leads is sick and subservient. So she attempts suicide half-heartedly by taking a handful of tablets along with whisky. Luckily, she is saved by Gul and his henchmen. After this incident, Ritu returns to her husband who accepted her without any questions asked and they'd gone off to the hills for two months to get away from everything. Though her husband is boring as ever, but she now realizes that he is very sweet about everything. In the lap of nature, her process of self-realization starts, and she worships the "original Earth Mother" who mends her.

Shobha De's views about the social disparity unbridled in society can easily be gleaned here. The pertinent point, however, is how can this social inequality be remedied? Except if a woman is financially self-reliant and except if she contributes monetarily to the family, no improvement can be proposed to her societal position and she will stay docile to man's conscience and predominance complex. Women empowerment in different walks of life is another obstacle to woman's servitude and debasement. Both joined together will go far to make her socially more satisfactory.

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