

Self Esteem of a Woman in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*

Dr Ritu Priyadarshini .V

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Sri Krishna College of Engineering and Technology, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract: *Shobha De's maiden novel Socialite Evenings discusses the story of Karuna, a prominent Bombay socialite, who escapes the nightmare of a broken marriage, failed relationships and a mentally disturbed sister. The novel deals with the people of high society and their way of life which revolves around the main character Karuna who longs for a luxurious life who ends up marrying an aristocrat with whom she leads an unexciting life, then divorces him and writes her memoir to escape from her trauma or present situation. De provides Karuna an opportunity to share her varied experiences in life. Initially she works as a model then resorts to writing and later making advertisement films. She meets all sorts of people during her career and learns a lot about human relationships. The novel gives a stark picture of the marginalisation of the Indian husbands at the hands of their wives. It is also the most vindictive of De's novels aimed at taking revenge on men.*

Keywords: marriage, marginalisation, independence, identity

1. Introduction

Karuna, the protagonist found her middle class life mundane and longed for an exciting life, this longing took root in her when the family migrated to Bombay. They move to the big city came at just the right time when Karuna was in her school going days. Bombay was mind boggling but to Karuna it was a perfect city that suited her extravagant life. The moment the family stepped out of the filthy train and on to the slushy platform at Bombay central, Karuna felt that she had finally found her city "over rounded, impersonal and entirely wonderful" (SE13). Everything fascinated her including the noisy and disorderly railway porters in fire-engine. Though the members of the family hated the city for the inconvenience like lack of servants, water and furniture, electricity, dirty kitchen, unfamiliar language and worst of all, unfriendly neighbours, Karuna happily ventured faith 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 made her problematic and disobedient both at home and at school. She did not want to be an ordinary middle class girl and she showed her opposition in being treated as one by her rebellious behaviour at home.

The richness of the city and the high life of the people attracted her more and she preferred to discover Bombay rather than showing interest in her studies. Karuna's wishes to be like the rich girls, naturally made her to choose her companions from that society. The submissive nature of Karuna's mother towards her father was one of the reasons for her hatred towards the middle class society. The middle class women were the first under the control of their father, then their husbands and later their sons. Their whole life was controlled by someone on the other. They lived for their parents or for their husband or for their children but not for themselves. They did not have a life of their own "Mother was preoccupied with what to cook for father's dinner. It never mattered what the children's preference were. It was always him" (SE12).

The children were left out of their little word "mother gave father priority, whether it was at meal times or anytime else. Whatever little time was left over from looking after his needs was then almost absent-mindedly distributed among the three of us" (SE12). Karuna was against such a kind of submissive life led by her mother. So it was natural that she revolted against the middle class life where a woman has no life of her own. Whereas the women in high societies were different. They went to clubs and they were least bothered about their children or family. The kind of life was seen in Charlie's home "we stole her mother's lipstick and many for the tickets and ice-cream. Her mother never found out. She was too busy playing rummy at the club" (SE20). Karuna's father's way of dealing with the children was also one of the reasons for her dislike of the middle class life. He spoke rarely to the children and there was a lack of closeness between the father and the daughters. So Karuna was sure that she would not be happy if she lived the way her mother did. Her father was not a cruel or an unkind man but the step he took to make his children disciplined, reminded Karuna of being in the bloody army. His anger towards her made her more rebellious when her photograph appeared in the newspaper for an advertisement. She did not want to be an obedient daughter like her sisters for she felt that only the middle class girls obey their parents. In spite of her father's scolding she continued to work in modelling. The act of rebellion kept her modelling going on and she performed in more and more advertisements and her father was helpless in controlling his disobedient and stubborn daughter. He had no other way but to pretend "he didn't know I was doing the show, mother pretended she didn't know where I was going three afternoons a week. And I pretended I didn't notice them pretending not to know" (SE27).

Karuna wanted to be noticed by all, like the celebrities in the high society, so she resented her middle class origin and the shabby life. Even in her way of dressing she did not want to reveal her middle class status. Dress was not a problem when she was in school because school uniform offered her protection though they were made out of rough

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drill. It still looked like everybody else's and it did not distinguish her from other students as middle class. "But in college, the students wore colourful dresses and she did not want to go in her "sensible" pleated skirts and 'modest' blouses when all the others would be dressed in clinging sweaters and tight skirts? And as the year wound to a close they begun work on their adult wardrobes in a frenzy and I'd die thinking of my own hand-me-downs" (SE18), to college because it would make her look like a middle-class. She was ready to forgo her studies. She prayed that she should fail so that she need not go to college in her middle class dress.

Karuna is concerned with money rather than love, only in need of a high society, high class people to move with and grand cocktail parties to enjoy. Karuna concealed her engagement with Bunty, a management trainee in a multinational firm "whose only disqualification was his ordinariness" (SE56). She accepted the proposal for "his head-on, dead-on approach" (SE58). This different and direct proposal attracted her and she felt her life would also be different in the fashion world which would bring a life leading to wealth, freedom, status and mainly the fulfillment of her desires. Finally she discovered a very carrying and affectionate fiancé mainly because of his weak financial condition and married the man who turned out to be just "an average Indian husband" (SE65).

Karuna to her utter bewilderment and disappointment was made to live a subordinate life like her mother. Her modelling stopped and was made a dutiful wife listening to her husband. He brainwashed her and made her feel inferior and worthless. Karuna realized then that men were no different in the aristocratic society were just like her father, he loved to dominate the women folk in the family. Yet they were not evil men, but what they did to the lives of women went beyond evil. Women were reduced to being marginal people and Karuna was not free from it. The desires and wants of the women were taken for granted that it is always secondary to the men.

Women like Karuna put up with her husband not out of compulsion or any conviction, but they needed one to afford the luxurious of life. Karuna, though rebellious in her childhood days to her father, could not show her rebellion towards her husband because she got the comforts and luxurious which she did not get from her husband, like not arguing with him when he was unhappy and did things that the way he wanted. She felt passive and powerless and tired not to think about her need. She was pushed to live her life just like her mother. The more Karuna's marriage dead-end, the harder she tried to convince herself as a drifter, letting life happen to her.

Even though Karuna had all luxuries and comforts as she wished for in her childhood days, she was not able to lead a happy married life. Her husband was neither a villain nor a hero. Though he became equal to Abe in business after his father's death, Karuna was not happy. Karuna was merely a puppet in the hands of her dominating husband.

Karuna knew well of the advice of Ritu, one of the upper class society. According to her controlling men is to make them feel they are superior, calling their husbands "darling" at least in front of his friends and the idea of pretending and pampering them in public. But all the things would never impress her husband. Karuna expected an exciting life which she did not get from her husband. Bunty thought and behaved as if Karuna's requests and expectations would happen only in an imaginary world.

Marriage was a kind of necessary evil with Karuna and other women in the novel. They did not like having a husband yet they had one. They wanted one under the roof, as a stranger with whom they could spring up occasional confrontation.

Karuna realized how true her mother was when she said to her on the evening of her marriage "marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is something to get used to" (68). She knew that most of the women concurred with this viewpoint. Karuna's mother represented the middle class society. She adjusted with her husband even when her husband did not give equal importance to her. She was satisfied to be a shadow of her husband. Karuna, in spite of her feeling suffocated, tired to adjust with her husband in the male dominated society.

In Bombay woman worked, married, divorced and remained single. It took time for Karuna to get into that society. Karuna had a formal relationship with her husband. Intimacy between them seemed missing altogether. She detested the indifference and callous attitude of her husband and she had no other choice, but to spend the time doing crosswords and scrabbles. It was an intolerable and unbearable punishment for an active and rebellious woman like Karuna to settle down as 'a well-trained Indian wife'; Karuna realized that, whatever the status was, Indian women were only leading a suppressed life in the society.

Karuna stick on to her husband who was a tolerable man in comparison with other men who drank and beat their wives. Karuna was made to be mere shadow of her husband and she was not allowed to draw any attention for herself by wearing colourful dress or jewels. Even to parties, she was not allowed to wear colourful or attractive dresses. When Karuna pulled out a ghagra to wear for a party, Bunty scolded her "Are you crazy? You want to go out with me dressed in that? You'll look like a sweeper woman! And don't tell me you're planning to wear that junk?" he yelled, pointing to my precious hoard of old silver jewellery" (SE83). Karuna always wanted to be different from others and the husband's indifference to her reminds her of her father's strict military way of handling his daughters. Karuna was not able to take a quick decision to divorce her husband and relieve herself from the unhappy situation, she involved herself in theatre. This involvement brought her closer to Krish, a married man and a friend of her husband "more Krish than theatre" (SE164). Karuna's three years affair with Krish made her to go to the extent of meeting him at Venice. She planned well in such a way that her unsuspecting husband send her happily to stay with her sister in London. She did not feel

even a tinge of guilt or remorse of shame, she was not even moved by her husbands' words. "I'll miss you, wifey. Our home won't be the same without you" (179). She waved to him cheerfully. At that moment one thing that mattered to her was being with Krish.

Karuna was bold enough to express without any hesitation her sexual urge for a man, even to her husband when he discovered about her affair. She made an ingenious declaration about her inner thirst "I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him 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" (186).

Karuna's self-centeredness is also seen when she discovered that she was pregnant. She was bothered about what the society would think of her and not the baby. The discovery that she was 'pregnant' made her quite nervous and she was in a state of panic. Karuna was not heart broken when her husband wanted to break up their marriage suspecting her paternity. She was able to move out and make a life for herself. Here she differed from her traditional and orthodox mother. Karuna was able to come out of her marriage bond boldly unlike her mother.

Karuna wanted to lead a luxurious life but when she left her husband's house she took nothing except few things necessary for her. She believed there was nothing in the house that belonged to her anymore once her husband had decided to divorce her. But the husband cheated her by not giving the alimony after the divorce. Karuna was also not interested in the alimony from her husband. Karuna moved to her friend, Anjali's house with a few belongings and started living with Anjali, the idea of keeping the baby did not stay firm in her mind. Anjali was a well experienced woman. When Karuna thought of not aborting the child, Anjali put out that thought by saying that Karuna's child should not have a lonely and unhappy life like Mimi with divorced parents.

Karuna wanted to make money soon because she was used to the luxuries and could not lead an ordinary life. She wanted a fashionable life but not at the cost of self-respect. She refused to live with Anjali even though she insisted Karuna to stay with her until she found a job. Not wanting to be a burden to her friend, she moved out from Anjali's house into a PG accommodation despite her dislike for the landlady Mrs. Jero Mehta, her daughter Shireen and the inmaid named Savitei.

Karuna's longing for an aristocratic life and her aim to live independently without any financial support from others made her work in the insecure world of freelancers. Even in that state she tried to have an identity for herself in the society. She really looked forward to acting. She took up small roles in the Hindi version of 'Desire under the Elms' directed by Swapna. Luck, hard work, ambition and her skill, everything played an important role in Karuna's life. Girish, the film maker, who was impressed by Karuna's acting skill and performance planned to give

her the main character role Shakuntala in the film 'Shakuntala'.

Karuna's relationship with Girish and his son Kunal was misinterpreted by Varan, the editor of the 'outlook' in the Gossip column to show his grudge against Girish. Having realized that living alone can also give happiness; Karuna refused the ex-husband even though he grovelled at her feet to come back to him. She also refused the proposal of Girish. She did not want marriage to be an obstacle in her career. Moreover, the earlier marriage and the bitterness had taught her not to have such horrible experiences any more in her life. She was not interested in having children also. She had the responsibility to look after her parents who did not have a son to look after them in their old age. Karuna was confident enough to face the world alone without the support of anyone. She was earning as much as any man and she did not want to complicate her life by getting into the entanglement of marriage. She did not want to depend on men in the future. She wanted to be independent and wanted to be praised and recognized by all. Karuna did not want to be just an ordinary woman looking after the husband and the children. She planned to live as she liked and accepted her single-woman status "It wasn't money or success I was looking to in my life at that point it was the freedom to do what I wanted" (SE273-274). Sangeeta Yadav says "De has portrayed Karuna not as a single middle class girl but rather as a bold person who is ready to go to any extent to identify herself with the world full of females like Anjali, a famous socialite" (SE276). Karuna, however, moved a step ahead of Anjali, since she achieved her selfhood and identity by freeing herself of the marriage and men mania. Even though she was an entrepreneur in her profession, She worked up her way in the field. Towards the end of the novel, she decided to narrate her life's experience by publishing a book.

The women in Shobha De's fictional world belong to the world of showbiz, opulence and romance. Their problems and concerns are different from those of the ordinary, traditional, middle class woman. Being educated and wealthy, they have an easy access to new ways of life informing women's independence. The recent ideas about women's liberation have brought to them awareness about their marginalisation and developed an intense desire for freedom. In *Socialite Evenings* Karuna's words reveal how these women have been influenced by feminist thinkers and women writers. The different nature of their lives and concerns makes them involve in a different form of struggle. Unlike their traditional counterparts these women do not find marriage and family as the source of ultimate happiness. Their views about life and women's freedom may seem insignificant and irrelevant as they expose the subtle ways in which patriarchal system works to perpetuate man's dominance in society and interpersonal relationships. Those women seek equal treatment from man. They resent their neglect at the hands of unresponsive men. These women's main concern is to make their presence felt. The subtle ways that render women's role insignificant become the major cause of these women's protest for Identity.

If Karuna's life is divided into three phases, like before marriage, married life, life after the separation from her husband. One can see how Karuna has been a different girl, a different wife and a different woman with her own expectations of life, and how the quest to know about herself which has started towards the end of the first phase, is stopped abruptly with her marriage and has been under control in the second phase only to be sprung up in the third phase more powerfully making her disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient.

Karuna's first phase is marked by her discontentment with her middle class origins. The hatred of middle class pedantic life, inadequate facilities runs throughout her life and her fear to be one among this pedantic class is the guiding force behind her major decisions like marriage and taking up a job of her choice. Like her sisters and her other classmates of middle class background, she cannot placidly accept her middle class origins. She wishes to be one among the sophisticated people of her class.

This unfulfilled hunger to be part of the smart and beautiful set and her humiliations in the hands of these sophisticated dolls, her realization that no one can understand her feelings make her behave differently. With the turbulent feelings hidden in her breast, behaving restlessly she becomes the most undisciplined girl both at school and home. Unable to understand her feelings her sisters and parents feel puzzled about her.

Karuna's continuation in the modeling profession and her friendship with Bunty are only the reactions that spring out of rebellion but not out of interests. She is aware of this, still she continues in these two ways in a vague sort of way, unconsciously trying to find out the proper direction. She feels convinced that modelling does not suit her. At that stage, she is wise enough to think that modeling does not suit her. At that stage, she is wise enough to think that modeling is not her field, unable to take any decision she struggles and feels restless. She feels the need to look into herself to take proper decisions. So with her hard earned money, she buys a ticket to go to United States. The journey is supposed to be an expedition to find out about herself.

The film maker whom she met at a party in India intrudes with a marriage proposal. Though she is disturbed by it, it helps her to rethink over her decision about her engagement with her boyfriend Bunty. She decides to break her engagement with Bunty. She realizes she cannot even marry the ad-film-maker. She comes back to India with no decision being taken over her career and marriage. In such a situation, she is pushed into marriage by a man who would not take no for an answer. This marriage with all its bondage puts a temporary stop to her quest.

Karuna remains alone among the wives circle with her discontentment. She realizes that she has done a wrong thing in taking decision to marry this person without realizing herself properly. It becomes clearer to her when her marriage becomes meaningless and their love making an affair. Her discontentment springs mainly from her world of difference between her concept of marriage and

that of the society. To her disappointment she understands that her husband can never come up to her expectation to make marriage lively and interesting. She cannot expect anything better from her average Indian husband. She realizes that they belong to two different worlds. A mere impossibility of leading a happy life makes her disappointed and rebellious. But she cannot shake off her marriage as she has done with her modeling profession. In her helplessness, not able to adjust, she is afraid to think even about her problems, because thinking means taking decisions. So to avoid thinking and to suppress her anger and rebellion, she takes refuge in books; this step taken innocently to come out of the boredom turns out to be an extra-marital relationship. It results in her marriage breakdown.

Separated from her husband, Karuna is endowed with the privacy to find out about herself. Her undergoing of hysterectomy, her agony over her husband taking another woman, her insecurity makes her feel depressed and dejected. She goes through all these physical and mental turmoil with no one beside her except the caring Anjali. With her encouragement and exhortations, she comes out of depressed state that has bound her so far. She becomes so poised, controlled and determined. When she realizes that she does not have anything to claim as her own, and no one to rely upon except herself she thinks that she has to do something decisive about her life. For the first time, she feels the need for a room and money of her own. She takes up some odd jobs. Some she understands that the meagre amount coming from the odd jobs can only afford her a middle class life which she cannot stand. So with Anjali's help she takes up other jobs, to make some real money which can transport her to the luxurious life.

Once money started flowing in, Karuna starts to analyse herself and in the process she finds out that it is freedom to do what she likes give her absolute joy. Her decision to stick to the part time job and her staying with her parents looking after his needs like a responsible daughter are those little acts of independence that have brought her great joy. She feels so satisfied looking after her parents. She enjoys their company, care, love and concern. Unlike in the past, now she has privacy and freedom in her parent's house. She feels so contented and happy. She cannot sacrifice this independence and happiness to anything which does not give her happiness however reasonable it is in the eye of society. That's why Karuna rejects her husband's proposal to come back to him. At the same time she cannot sacrifice this state of happiness to something which she is vague about.

So when Girsh, the art-film maker comes to her with a proposal she does not like to take a hasty decision. She knows that rushing to a decision is repeating the past mistakes. To take a proper decision, she has to find out about herself. A little later, she realizes that she cannot be happy with any man who deprives her of her present state of independence though it might look a selfish act. Marriage to her is sacrifice. So when her mother with her motherly anxiety asks her to settle soon in life, Karuna analysed herself and felt that she was not ready to sacrifice

this independent, peaceful single life to marriage which requires a lot of sacrifices.

Being single in the society means Karuna is inviting problems. She has experienced men trying to take advantage of her because she was not escorted by a man. She knew it was difficult to live in the society without a man but at the same time she felt that for the sake of society she cannot make her life miserable. She knew that if she shared her hard earned room with a wrong person it would spoil the beauty of the room. She was ready to be another Anjali who in her fear to be single married a person who was a homo. Towards the end Karuna as a person who understood her sin fully confidently comes out with a statement saying that being single was good for her, which was a decision due to the result of her constant intensive search of herself.

Shobha De rejects sexual discrimination and gives her characters dignity and individuality which they justifiably deserve. Shobha De rejects sexual discrimination and gives her characters dignity and individuality which they justifiably deserve. Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* is a successful attempt to bring about the plight of the woman who is cornered in the maze of domestic chores and takes an unconventional decision to keep her 'individuality', and 'self-esteem' intact.

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