Chapter VI
A Slice of Urban Life
(Second Thoughts)

In Second Thoughts, Shobha De comes up with the story of Maya, a young and attractive middle class woman who goes into an arranged marriage with Ranjan. She indulges in a strange relationship with Nikhil when her partner becomes a cold sexual partner by breaking the chains of social morality even if the experience of freedom is of a short duration. Alka Saxena in her article, “Second Thoughts: A Slice of Urban Life” extends her opinion as:

Second Thoughts is a realistic representation of the psyche of the traditional Indian men and women. Although they claim to be the proved products of the twenty-first century, but deep down they still cherish and nourish the age-old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of men and women has hardly undergone any change. (The Fiction of Shobha De, 261)

Bombay (Mumbai) is a dream land for most of the Indians. In particular, Bengalis, Malayalees, etc have much fascination towards the life patterns of Bombay. Many Bengalis move to Bombay in order to lead free life. For them, it is a world of fantasy. Bombay has two prototypes namely Ranjan and Maya in the novel Second Thoughts. Being a Bengali, Maya leads her life in a world
of fantasy and fascination in Bombay, but not with realities of life. This leads to fascination about romance in the marriage.

The most significant social issue that Shobha De focuses on is the infidelity in the institution of marriage. When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, the colourful picture melts gradually in front of her. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine her identity always ends up in lack of communication. At this juncture, the woman feels loneliness. In order to search for a companion, she considers another man as substitute to share her love.

Mismatches always lead to destabilization in family life. Generally, a woman gets ready for marriage, in the hope of realizing all her dreams about love and pleasures of life. When she fails to achieve this marital bliss, she starts developing detachment with her partner. It leads to dislocation and displacement of their relations. Maya and Ranjan’s marital life is punctuated all along by matrimonial indifference. Maya thinks that her husband understands little of her aspirations. She fails to maintain balance in between fantasy and reality. She is sexually frustrated so that she is slowly alienated from her husband.

When a woman is frustrated in her conjugal relationship, she is painfully and helplessly pulled into a relative and parallel relationship with another man. She considers her husband as ‘other’ person who is found in the wedlock. Maya waits for Ranjan to respond to her advances, her biological needs and her
claims. When he does not fulfil her erotic fantasies, she becomes unhappy and frustrated. Then she feels that her emotional cravings are answered by her neighbouring boy, Nikhil. She deems Ranjan as other person whom she meets accidentally in her path of life. She blames her husband for his lack of sexual interest. Hence, she takes refuge in the company of Nikhil.

Shobha De wants to reveal the fact that the longings of a woman should be answered in the wedlock. When she realizes that that the wedlock hinders her aspirations, she tries to escape from it. In the hope of getting an answer for her unanswered questions, she revolts against the denial of life and seeks shelter in the lap of another man. 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. In the end, she is forced to confront reality when her dreams are cracked up. As a result, she also foregoes Nikhil who is an opportunist to exploit her situation.

In reality, the word ‘Maya’ means ‘fantasy’ or ‘a realm of imagination’. Her name, Maya is well justified in this novel because she always wishes to travel in the world of fantasy. She tries to fulfil her aspirations in the dream world of her own. But she fails to realize the fact that dreams never come to
true. However, she is compelled by circumstances to accept her loneliness as her only companion.

Still, women are victims to bridal interviews where her interests and echoes are rejected. It is on a sultry May evening in Bombay, that Maya meets Ranjan, her future husband. She arrives from Calcutta earlier in the day to meet her in-laws-to-be. Her first impressions about Bombay are far from favourable because it smells of desperation and deceit. Her mother and uncle urges that they have decided to come to Bombay and meet Ranjan Malik and his mother for marriage proposal. When she protests about an arranged marriage, her mother argues: “Ranjan is quite a catch. Who knows, by the time we get to Bombay, some other lucky girl might have grabbed him” (3). Then Maya replies that it is not as if he were the last bachelor on earth. Maya likes her skin, a warm, rich golden brown, like sunlight dancing on the Hooghly that offset her gleaming black hair and large, dark eyes to advantage. Maya never sees her mother more excited.

Though the world has changed a lot, it is very difficult to absorb some customs in India that pictures women as dolls in the market. Maya and her family members start for the Malik’s residence a good hour before the appointed time. Maya concludes with relief, having a quick look around the neat living room, that the Malik household is not all that different from her own Calcutta home. While Maya sits down on a stuffed sofa, Mrs. Malik points to the corner and announced that is Ranjan’s system from America. Her mother,
Chitra, Prodipda uncle and Maya nod a bit that they are in perfect harmony with the sentiment. Maya is surprised and disappointed by Ranjan’s lack of common courtesy and comments on it to Chitra, her mother on their way home. When Ranjan’s mother tells that both wife and husband have to work to live well, he declares that he is earning well; and it is the women’s duty to run a good home. It is clear that women in this novel suffer from financial insecurity. N.K. Neb in his article, “Feminist Stance in Shobha De’s Novels” states: “Maya in Second Thoughts suffers due to her financial dependence on Ranjan. Similarly, traditional Indian women like Maya’s mother have to request their husbands for money even for their daily needs. Financial security is the basis for women’s emancipation” (Critical Responses to Feminism, 178). In this Globalized world, the status of woman is consolidated due to the proliferation of job opportunities which makes her achieve financial freedom liberating her from the monetary dependence on men.

It is quite natural that women at the teenage travel in the world of fantasy, having their own dreams about life. Maya says that she feels very happy being in Bombay. Chitra sees victoriously at her brother, Prodipda saying that Maya falls passionately in love with the boy. At last Bombay world would definitely become her eventual home.

When women are alone, some men always deem it an opportunity to exploit them. One day Nikhil Verma, her fourth floor neighbour boy asks whether she will be able to come out of the house. He is different from his
family members unlike his mother, Pushpa who invites Maya up for coffee on the day after she moves into the building. When she introduces her son, Maya’s impression is a slightly insipid - Pushpa is oval whereas Nikhil is slender. At that moment, Nikhil asks twenty rupees to pay for the cab. When his mother hesitates, Maya gives him the required money; in return, he pays thanks to her calling ‘aunty’. She feels like an ‘elder’ to him though he may be just five or six years younger than her. The salesman, while showing mops, comments that Nikhil is a boy who gets mixed up with girls like Nalini Mehta. Yet, an unreasonable jealousy immobilizes her.

It is a bitter experience for any woman if her husband is passive to her womanly desires. One day, Ranjan comes home in the early evening feeling a ‘sinus headache’. He sighs like a man on his deathbed and nods in slow motion. Dr. Goal examines him efficiently while saying soothing words of confidence. In his own way, Ranjan is demonstrative and charming. But she soon realizes if she shows affection, it will make him uncomfortable. He knows, for instance, that she enjoys wearing flowers in her hair. But in Bengal, it is women who tempt other people’s husbands with fragrances and perfumes, flowers and kaajal. The first time she comes home with a gajra of mogras winding in her hair, Ranjan smells the air suspiciously. He is very much hostile to the small desires of Maya.

In the Indian society, woman is objectified as a being, who has to shoulder the domestic chores only. One day, Maya asks Ranjan to go out
together on weekends; he replies that life is not a picnic and as a married woman, she has to come up with responsibilities. She urges him that she can find a job as she has a degree in textile designing. He explodes: “In our families, the only sort of work ladies do is social work. Our relatives criticize us if you suddenly take up a job” (29). Still, husbands in India are unable to accept the domination of woman in their inner hearts. In her article, Alka Saxena comments: “Shobha De captures the middle class psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan - his attitude to hold on tight to the purse strings so as to control his woman, his lectures on wifely duties, his complete control even on the use of the air-conditioner” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 262). Foolishly, she decides to make small talk to break the silence. Ranjan throws down a half-eaten slice of bread cursing that she has started chatting with useless people. She answers angrily that she has nobody else to talk to all day. In reply, he tells that there is music, television and cleaning the house to pass the time. It is the passive attitude of the husband which an Indian wife cannot bear. That night, she creeps into bed as silently as possible but he seems to be in deep sleep. She lies awake marvelling how to induce sleep. She tries resorting to pleasantly contorted memories of college days but nothing has worked till Nikhil comes into her dream. It is an instance what makes her think of an alternative to satiate her inner soul.

It is observed that young boys wait for exploiting the frustration of married women in order to accomplish their carnal pleasures. Nikhil’s
uninvited presence makes her develop a sort of infatuation towards him. The
day after Maya takes coffee with Pushpa, when Nikhil rings her door bell at
noon to payoff twenty rupees given by her. Then he repeatedly asks her
whether he can call her ‘didi’. She answers that he should call her by her name
or whatever he feels comfortable with. The image of Nikhil starts giving a
strange relaxation to her mind. She stops trying to resist the melting ache that is
emanating through her stiff body. In fact, she laughs so much her body moves
with unexpected and unfamiliar glee. She is half-afraid her secret will disturb
Ranjan’s sleep but it does not.

Maya’s mother, Chitra begins writing long, dull letters full of motherly
advice to her. As a young girl, Maya sometimes allows into her room while she
dresses after her quick bath. Her parents have always slept in different room.
Insolently, she teases her mother: “what is the issue, Ma? Tell me. Why don’t
you and Baba sleep on the same bed? And why can’t I sleep between the two of
you?” (37). She smacks on the head saying lamely that Maya will understand
on her own about it later. It is not the time to ask her mother so that she decides
to ask her father instead. He answers that their taste is different from hers. In
India, the woman is not allowed to know the enveloped secrets of familial life
until she experiences it. But the postmodern woman is able to explore them
without any hesitation.

Generally, women crave for sharing their emotions mentally and
physically with their male counterparts. When it fails, she is thus liable to seek
out pleasure from some other sources. A year after their marriage, Maya tells Ranjan that they ought to talk about something. He, with a defensive look, announces that wives should realize that when a man comes home dead tired; he craves for a little peace in the house. For once, his attitude and his tone have changed her. She never feels wanted or invited in the bedroom as it remains Ranjan’s room, where as the kitchen is an area that belongs inclusively to her. It shows male chauvinism and indifference, which make women to bear the inhibition imposed by the society for years. Late one evening, while she is struggling to keep mustard seeds in hot oil, she has heard the door bell. It is Nikhil, who tells that his mother has sent the world’s best dahi-wada maker. She takes the dish from his hand thankfully as Ranjan loves dahi-wadas. She does not know what sort of conversation she can have with Nikhil. She feels he is very smart for her, therefore her inner self is craving the company of an affectionate substitute. When Ranjan insults her, she guiltily washes her face watching her image in the mirror over the wash basin. Suddenly, she dreams of Nikhil tasting her and a small secret smile dances around her mouth with mirth.

Naturally, women become victims to the flattery of men when they boast about their external self. One day, as Maya lazily watches at her collection of saris, her fingers pinpoint at a parrot green one with a narrow black woven border. Gradually, a second thought develops in her mind. She recalls Nikhil’s comment when he has seen her in it a few weeks ago that says: “You look like a beautiful garden today” (45). When she goes back to the
bathroom, she notices Ranjan’s reflection in the mirror from the back and is watching her attentively. When she recognizes the fact, it has ingratiated Ranjan to her. Here she is at twenty-three with only one ‘kissing boyfriend’ behind her. Ranjan betrays it to her two weeks after their four day, awkward sex honeymoon at a gloomy hotel in Mahabaleshwar, a hill resort near Bombay. Ranjan fails to understand the personal self of Maya. G.D. Barche in the article, “Maya: Another eve in Second Thoughts” presents the plight of Maya how she is humiliated in the web of family saying: “Maya’s tragedy is that she is treated like a figure made of a ‘alabaster’ and not of ‘flesh and blood’ before marriage by her mother and after marriage by her husband” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 275). It shows the sheer indifference of a husband towards woman’s sexual urges though she may be the spouse to him.

When Maya asks, Ranjan tells her in a broken voice that it is difficult for him to maintain a relationship with any woman. She enquires whether it is easier when he is in America to have a girl for which he has responded that it is not true. Though he is cold to her responses, she puzzles to herself why Ranjan is not bad looking. As a matter of fact, there is something attractive about his smile, his thick dark hair and large eyes that regard the world ceremoniously. Ranjan continues to talk about his experiences with co-students on the campus in the U.S.A.

It is observed that people never feel ashamed of having a debate about their romantic encounters in the postmodern urban set-up. Ranjan feels guilty
to discuss his failures with the six girls he has tried to make love to; it is not at all a sexual gambit. When the first year of their marriage is over, her life becomes very much routine. Once in a while, she would receive sweet phone calls from the ‘office wives’ issuing invitations to various sari sales in the city. But he is suspicious when she referred Vimla Rangani’s call. One day she has complained that she has to make some friends in Bombay. Ranjan replies if she needs company, she will call his mother as she has lived there for over twenty-five years. He also says that a housewife’s duty is to stay at home and discharge responsibilities which she should learn from her mother. It is Ranjan, who is representing the manly supremacy even in the postmodern world where the woman has succeeded in achieving an identity for her. Ranjan worships his mother very much and in return she adores him. But his father has no identity in their lives.

In the postmodern urban families, the identity of man is challenged by woman. Maya asks Prodipmama about her father-in-law, Amartya Malik but gets a blank answer. Sometime ago, she comes across an old Photograph of his with Ranjan and enquires lightly about their relationship. Then Ranjan’s irritable expression indicates that he is no more, for what she feels rather sorry for poor Amartya Malik. Her mother-in-law’s attitude is calculatingly vague. She expresses a few casual remarks showing that there has been Ranjan’s life. As she looks into Ranjan’s relationship with his parents, she compares his mother with her own. Her mother presents a shiny green diary in her trunks
which is of an entirely different age. She starts registering her impressions of Bombay in which many of the entries related to Nihkil. She is unfair to Nihkil but there is something attractive about him. He is good-looking having average height, athletic build, tanned skin, nice hands, nice eyes, nice smile which makes him sound like a college girl’s dream boy. In fact, his presence brings a slight difference to her dull life. Occasionally, she catches sight of herself and is bewildered by the permanently glossy expression in her eyes.

Indian women have a sort of weakness to wear clothes as per the whims and fancies of their lovers, though they call it a womanly instinct. One day, when she cleans her cupboard, she spots a blue sari with a tiny white Peacock motif on which Nihkil flatters her. One day as she is standing at the door, she hears Nihkil leaving his house. Tuesdays acquire a new lease of life for her by sharing idlis at the doorstep with Nihkil. She has many an old worn saris that she wears at home. Ever since Nihkil has paid interest in the blue one, she keeps aside the other blues to wear.

Men in particular are passive to fulfil the simple desires of their female partners. Ranjan fails to treat Maya as a woman having her own dreams. Maya often entices to pick up the phone and speak to her mother or an old school friend called, Aarti in Calcutta. Soon after their marriage, Ranjan gives her a guided tour of the flat and points to the phone. In many ways, she is more like her father, an observer, not a participant. Her Prodipda uncle disappears from the scene once she is married. She tries to phone him a few times but he is far
away from her. She marvels about his abrupt withdrawal from her life. Her mother and Maya have a strange relationship, as they are bored of each other most of the time. Since her parents ever hardly talks to each other, quarrels are out of the question. Her father’s college friend, Ashishda often arrives at their home around tea-time. Her mother always feels embarrassed on his every arrival to their home. These sorts of incidents are very common in most of the families in India, where women are considered to be passive objects to obey the orders of their spouse.

When a woman is obsessed with second thoughts, she cannot balance her personal self from that enchanting influence. As Maya goes about her morning duties, she often wonders how Nikhil spends his day. She misses him for days except once as he runs through the June rain and jumps into a waiting car. It is around seven one evening, while she is in the kitchen preparing Ranjan’s tea tray. Then she hears the doorbell ring, it is Nikhil who surprises that day. He requests her play something on her cassette recorder. She murmurs something while her eyes fix on an ugly brown flower on his orange lungi. He tells her to listen to the forth song on side B and then he departs. She stands there puzzled, holding the tape tightly when Ranjan finds her in that frail state. But Ranjan does not notice the tape in her hand, and also she tries to hide it. Nikhil notices her depression and decides to write a sad, sad song about a lonely lady. She appeases herself that at least there is something to look forward to at the end of the weekend.
It is very difficult for women to maintain equilibrium in life, when they are involved in extramarital relationships. As it turns out, Maya’s protracted waiting and anxiety are short-circuited at 10.30 the next morning. When there is a smart knock, she rushes to the door. It is Nikhil, dressed in dirty Jeans and a white Khadi Kurta, gestures with his hands as if her husband were at home. He nods as her eyes communicate the fear what she is experiencing. He raises the left hand and waves to meet her on Monday. She does not dare react but raises her voice unnaturally not to come again. But Nikhil becomes his usual blur as she quickly shuts the door on him. That morning, the bathroom door is indeed open, so that Ranjan enquires who that person is. Her voice trembles when she answers that he is young Verma boy. Then Ranjan comes from the bathroom asking why she has described him as ‘young’. Ranjan also asks whether he is a regular visitor in that case. She starts feeling anxious with the hot oil burning on her face. Ranjan curses the Verma boy as a loafer and bad character. He also suggests that young married women should not invite loafers into their homes, when the husband is away in Bombay. The husbands suffer from a sort of suspicion if their wives are beautiful.

Ranjan does not raise the topic of Nikhil again that weekend having an opinion that she would change her ways soon. He is absolutely correct in his calculation about her character but she is making a fool of herself. Still he feels suspicious when he utters that life is not a Hindi movie as if she did not know that. She thinks of Ranjan and Nikhil does not look like criminals to her. Her
mother used to warn not to go outs of her home as she may be deceived. He tells a story how his colleague’s neighbour’s wife is deceived by strangers. While Maya looks out of her window one afternoon, she notices her banana woman is missing from her usual spot. Then Nikhil says not to waste her time and asks her to have some ‘bhelpuri’. She refuses it as her husband does not like it. Nikhil blurts out on her whether her husband prohibits from eating bhelpuri for which she feels very much embarrassed to explain.

When the predicament of woman is unnoticed by her husband, she finds consolation from others. Maya listens to Nikhil’s tape on Monday, when Ranjan leaves the house exactly twelve minutes later than usual. He makes a fixation out of punctuality all his life, which frightens her very much. His exit always generates a sense of exhilaration not because she does not want him around, but she feels free to breath normally. Ranjan is a nervous, tense dresser, who can rarely find things even if they happen to be under his nose. Then she feels she must have heard ‘lonely Lady’ of Nikhil twenty times in a row. Ranjan rarely phones from his office but one day he dials her saying that she has to wear yellow sari, which is disposed by his mother. Once, when she visits a Bangladeshi’s shop, the shopkeeper explains about Bombay where people have no time and no feelings but everybody should save his own skin. The Indian husband has ‘mother fixation’ so that he considers his spouse only as a substitute for his mother.
Maya finds Nikhil’s scribbling note under the door on which he mentions, ‘Liked it’. She glances at his writing as if induced by the patterns it creates. He is careful enough to avoid names. She crushes the piece of paper angrily and then releases her fist to see what she has done. She sits down heavily, she hears the phone ringing outside but defiantly she decides to let it go on ringing. She puts on her ‘wife voice’ but it is Nikhil. She keeps quiet for a moment, puzzling how he gets her number. He tells that it is through the little telephone man. Then the post man comes in that mood, she gives a furious reply to him, and also he refuses to hand over the letter to her. Then Nikhil enters the house and warns the post man to give it to Maya. When it is over, she begs Nikhil to leave her alone. When he is about to leave, she touches his arm reluctantly saying that she loves his song. It shows that she starts developing second thoughts in her mind when she fails to realize the exploitation of her situation.

In the changing world of globalization, the new woman is not an exception to domestic chores in countries like India. Maya experiences her first Bombay monsoon enjoying it. Though it is depressing her, she actually surrenders to the monsoon’s many moods. But the rains put Ranjan into a bad mood. Ranjan is due for a promotion later in the year which is obviously weighing on his mind. Recently, he acquires a new boss, Tom, an American whiz, all of 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 shows how husbands restrict the freedom of women in expressing their opinions. Then she suggests mildly that he should invite his boss home to dinner for which he agrees to it. Perhaps, he feels slightly more confident about inviting his American boss home. He knows that his Calcutta wife is not entirely ignorant about things around the world. It makes her wonder why he has not picked a Bengali girl from Bombay. When she asks about it, he replies that these Bombay Bengalis do not safeguard their cultural identity. Then she suggests whether they should invite Mathurs to dinner. He refuses saying that those people from Uttar Pradesh are aggressive and shameless. He continues that Maya has to take some time to get adapted to Bombay.

Some men do not hesitate to make use of their wives’ charm to climb the ladder of their career. 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. Her mother-in-law tells her that he is very good at English, both spoken and written. But Maya tries to correct him gently once or twice. Tom looks at her appreciatively commenting that she wears a nice lovely coloured Bengali sari. Next, he stares at a beautifully crafted set of brass rice bowls when he praises them. She feels secretly pleased as they are presented by her paternal uncle as a wedding gift. 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.

It is observed that how some Indian women’s mind is infatuated secretly on seeing the affluent people, who are in position. The new woman does not hesitate to accompany strange men even though the society blames her. 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 his career rather than the purity of his wife.

The next day, Nikhil comes home asking whether she has impressed the boss-man. She replies it is not his Parents’ monopoly to play silly games. When he leaves, she assures herself that she can handle his unannounced intrusions into her life more competently in future with a kiss.

In most of the Indian families, husbands do not provide liberty for their wives to pursue education and career wholeheartedly. One day, Maya explodes
that she decides to join a few classes of pottery as she enjoys much leisure. Ranjan answers: “Housewives don’t have extra time—there so much to be done around the home. Take Ma’s example. She is busy round the clock” (139). He continues saying that those so-called classes are often nothing but recruitment places for prostitution as Bombay is the country’s prime place for it. As she listens to Ranjan, her mind reels off in a crazy direction. In the background, she would hear Niki Marx’s reports on T.V. He is very much excited to pay attention to Niki (anchor on T.V.) commenting on her clothes and hair style. She likes Niki too and often fantasizes about her challenging life. During her college years, she dreams about becoming a journalist and challenging the world. Her parents takes their newspapers very seriously, her father reads the ‘Ananda Bazar Patrika’ and her mother, ‘The Telegraph’. She is quite young when she first notices her mother’s morbid preoccupation with violent and unnatural ways of ending life, slightly disturbed by the obsession of her dead sister. Unfortunately, the so-called evil does not free her from her sister’s ghost though the witch doctor does his best. But her father fails to understand the pain of her mother.

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.

When Ranjan is away for a trip, Maya experiences a strange blankness. She thinks of her mother as she stares at the luminous star. Then the world becomes a vacuum for her. Ranjan locks the out-station phone facility before leaving because he is afraid of bills which indicates his rigid attitude in giving economic freedom to her. He gives a thousand rupees for her saying not to spend more than fifty rupees a day. He continues if there is an emergency, she has to contact his mother. 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 adopting the changing trends in the society recently, it is an obligation for them to act within the wheel of traditional customs which we are aping for centuries.

It is observed that women long for the necessary kick of companionship when their physical urges are unfulfilled. When the bell rings once again, there is Nikhil, whistling tunelessly at the door step. He strolls past Maya and sits down heavily in the nearest chair. She really wants is for him to get out that instant and leave her alone to bask in her misery. He senses her eyes and so he goes up shutting the door firmly. She asks him foolishly her husband’s absence does not give him the right to move into her house and provokes him where he has been all those days. He begins to get on her nerves with his presence in her flat. When she tells him that she hates his arrival to her home, he replies: “I’m feeling awful today. So are you. I need cheering up. So do you. Now, off you go-cold coffees for two. Got it?”(167). Silently, she goes into the kitchen and moves mechanically, like a programmed robot to prepare coffee for both.
Nikhil asks her to come for a ride with him to undo dullness. In response, she goes into her bedroom and changes into 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. After parking his bike, he and Maya strides up to the famous garden built over a massive tank. 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 kilometer from her house. She marches back home with a heavy heart than her tread. She detests the aftertaste of beer in her mouth and wants to gargle. When she enters the compound, the watchman enquires about her outing and then she stares coldly at the man. At that moment, a woman called Leena Mehta from the ground floor comes to her flat making her feel bored with her conversation. She wants to be alone, to relive the morning and to recreate the invaluable moments, Nikhil and she has shared recently. She feels that she takes risk during the outing with Nikhil. She likes having Nikhil around. 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
Maya is the replica of so many Indian middle class women in the urban context, where they rebel against the male macho that confines them to the enveloped home without allowing them to accomplish their desires. Ranjan phones from Delhi that night asking if she has been okay, but she murmurs some wifely sounds saying that she is really frightened. She does not know how she will be able to survive the night. As her mind is filled with fear, her head is crammed with all types of absurd images. She knows there is no point in forcing herself to sleep, as she feels very much tense and dreaded. She reaches for a small pad she keeps on her bed side and begins writing a letter to Nikhil.

Maya wants to convey Nikhil in that letter how she feels during outing. She feels guilty because of the way she has felt. Though she enjoys that unique feeling, she feels bad as she betrays Ranjan. When she gets married to Ranjan, everybody is happy and a little jealous as she is leaving for Bombay. She still believes that she is very lucky to have become Mrs. Ranjan Malik. She confesses it is wrong for a married woman to go out with a man especially in her husband’s absence. If Nikhil invites her to come out with him again, she probably does with less guilt. Though she comments all these things, she is unsure whether to give it to Nikhil or not. She keeps her head tiredly and falls into a light sleep. 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 conflict of female psyche, when she is oppressed in the hands of her husband who never allow her to enjoy the freedom all through her life.

Maya’s flirtations with Nikhil rejuvenate her spirits beyond measure. When the doorbell rings at ten’0 clock, Maya jumps out of bed and rushes to the door. It is Nikhil, who asks her to come with him. But she refuses to his proposal with what he abruptly leaves the place. She expects him to persuade her. She is mesmerized about Nikhil’s life outside that building. He considers her and Ranjan, ‘Uncool’, either. In this respect, two uncool people stick together in unholy matrimony. Prodip mama takes pride about the appearance of Maya saying: “You are the sun, the moon and all the stars in the firmament today” (200). But her mother feels dejected about the unnecessary make up of Maya as she has dark complexion. Maya agrees with her as she certainly is not looking best. In fact, Ranjan is so pleased with his own appearance. When he comments on her dark skin, she argues hotly with him that she does not suffer from any colour complex. It is the pride some women exhibit in rejecting the hegemony of men in spite of having dusky complexion.
Some husbands are passive to listen to the emotional cravings of their partners. Ranjan wires at precisely three minutes past nine o’clock that night. Maya is relieved to hear his voice but he does not pay attention to her suffering. Instead, he mentions crisply about office papers, keys and his investments and then keeps the receiver down. She sticks to the receiver for a few seconds, for she wants him to talk to her and enquire about her. She feels tears springing up in her eyes and she hastily brushes them away with an impatient, angry gesture: “Why not? Didn’t husbands share pleasant nothings with their wives?” (207). On an impulse, she phones her uncle but she pauses with uncertainty what to say next. When he insists, she complains that Ranjan is passive to her advances. Prodip mama says: “Ah, but men-husbands-rarely phone their wives just for a chat. Jamaibabu is no exception as that lovely-dovey talk only takes place during courtship. After marriage, everything changes” (208). She is not convinced at all but has no desire to continue the conversation. She does not tell her parents about Ranjan’s arrival in Calcutta. Perhaps, it is traditional for Bengali sons-in-law to display slight envy towards their wives’ families. She notices it with her own father, how he avoids meeting with her mother’s relatives.

Maya feels she misses her mother’s food. She finds herself reminding her mother at each meal even though she is not a good cook. But she cannot tell Ranjan that as he has already specified, ‘Men get used to eating a certain kind of food’. Her own wedding feast does not met with her mother’s approval,
since the arrangements have been left to Prodipmama and his dull wife. Her parents sanction a petty budget for that. She feels her parents are secretly relieved by the arrangements as the Bombay wedding eliminates their own relatives from the festivities.

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’s absence affects her in a strange way when her slow, dull daily routine life down still further. She thinks she will feel free of various duties like cooking the moment he has left for the airport. When she mentions about the clean flat, he shouts not to behave like a spoilt woman, Pushpa Verma. She asks him why he abuses Pushpa, when she observes his forehead creasing. He bursts out: “She is going to ruin her husband’s career, I tell you. Mark my words. And she’ll finish off that loafer son of hers. I hate woman like that. They have no culture, no feelings” (228). Maya is stunned at Ranjan’s strong feeling as he rarely detests anybody.

Maya does not realize till that point how strongly he feels about Nikhil and his mother. She wishes to defend ‘that boy’ and explain that he is not as much of a no-good. Ranjan looks into her face and obviously waits for some type of reaction. She is cautious that her expression remains neutral. She tells him about Nikhil’s mother’s statement that is a good student who works hard for a scholarship to the states. Ranjan shakes his head saying that he is also a good student but he never depends upon his father for money like Nikhil. She
feels: “Now I had walked into a potential landmine that would blow up in my face in a moment unless I found some way of diverting it” (230). Hence, she asks cheerfully if she can make Ranjan a cup of coffee. He shakes his head and continues to glare at her. Abruptly, he asks her whether she has been meeting Nikhil by any chance. When she negates, he says slowly the other day, he smells a cigarette smoke in the house suspecting Nikhil’s arrival to his home. She answers the carpenter, who comes to repair the door kept on smoking. She holds her breath, wondering whether Ranjan accepts to her idea. Fortunately, he is convinced with that.

Women at times question the existing morals, when they fail to conform to their desires and dreams. On seeing Ranjan’s genuine lack of interest in her, Maya sometimes wonders whether he fancies any women. But it is not a deliberate act of neglect. He views women only in context to men and family life. He can locate the moles on her body as exactly, even though he very rarely sees her without her clothes on. They enjoy their physical closeness and the warmth of his body. She craves for these moments and cherishes them for days afterwards. This aspect of Ranjan is so pleasing, it is a pity she does not see more of it. Only once, at a dull office party, Maya observes Ranjan looking animated while talking to a woman. He shows his fascination for another woman quite openly in her presence. By the same argument, if she feels what she does for Nikhil, he will also have to acknowledge that she is innocent. When she introduces herself to the woman, with whom Ranjan is intimate at
the party, she comments on Maya deliberately as Bengali. She asks him why everybody calls her like that at party, for which he answers as everybody there are from Bombay. She feels tears rolling down in her eyes, which lead to some disturbance between her and Ranjan.

Ranjan returns from his trip in a jubilant mood. Maya decides to go to the airport to greet him, not at all sure whether he is pleased to see her there. When Ranjan walks up to her briskly, she feels quite silly and awkward. He hands over a sari sent by her mother with what she feels disappointed. On the way home, he wants to visit his mother.

As Maya struggles with Ranjan’s small bag outside their building, Nikhil’s arm reaches out from behind her and lifts it out of her hand. When he comes in, she says: “How long does it take to make a phone call? I was worried about you. I also thought you were upset with me. Were you?” (249). She bargains with Nikhil to wait there, for she wants him to read a letter written by her. At that point, she hears the car driving up; she hurriedly pulls the bag into the house and drags it towards the room. In a hurry, she misses seeing an Iron wire lying across the living room floor. Her sandal catches in the wire with what she falls over Ranjan’s bag and is injured. Ranjan sits next to her and presses an icepack on her injured elbow. Then she feels 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*). It is the urgency for the postmodern husband to look into the psychological and physical needs of his wife, what she is unable to demonstrate at times. Unfortunately, most husbands fail to attend the needs of their partners. It leads to develop apathy towards marital life for her. As a result, she takes diversion in order to seek pleasure from another pore.

Maya struggles painfully to her feet and limps towards the bedroom. Ranjan follows her whispering that he will let his mother know about her fall. She replies that she can settle those things for herself. Then he reprimands that she is passive towards his mother. In reply, she is a little scared of her as she is very strict. That night, as she lies beside her husband, she starts thinking about sex. Once or twice, when she raises the subject, he shouts: “Are you that Sex-Starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex be so important to anybody, I’ve never understood” (257). Here Ranjan utterly fails in understanding the physical needs of his wife. He makes her feel so Aashamed of herself for possessing such thoughts. She wonders what Ranjan does to satisfy his desires.

Sometimes, Maya thinks she should take the initiative and try her luck with him. That night she wants to behave like a prostitute so that she does not get any sleep. When she reaches out for him, he objects saying that he needs rest after a hectic tour. She attempts her level best to coax him but fails. She
does not want to blame Ranjan as she absurdly coaxes him. D. Murali Manohar in his article, “Rejecting the Hegemony: The 1990s” points out:

The main reason for Maya to think in this manner is Ranjan’s indifference to her emotional and sexual desires. One has to blame Ranjan for his lack of understanding about his wife. Ranjan thinks that he is providing everything to his wife. He is providing material things. What about personal care, tenderness, affection, emotional expressions and romantic feelings? That does not mean Nikhil is providing all that. He is only an opportunist exploiting her. (Indian English Women’s Fiction, 162)

The promiscuity of urban woman cannot be objected in some cases today, where the husband becomes cold and passive to her emotional responses though he provides everything to lead the material life.

Maya’s mother-in-law rarely phones before seven-thirty in the morning so that Maya becomes speechless to hear her voice at six O’clock. Ranjan’s voice is afflicted as he knows something is wrong even before his mother can say it. When she asks him what has happened, he explains briefly it is mother’s heart. She asks him whether he has wanted her come later for which he replies need not. She sits by the window for more than two hours for she has never felt so useless. She feels desolate in her heart saying to herself: “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).

At that moment, Maya hears the doorbell ringing when she goes to answer it wearily. She opens the door and turns around to go back into the bedroom without even bothering to check who the caller is. It is Nikhil who greets her and then she whirls around to say ‘get out’. But it is the sight of the flowers in his hand that stops her. He walks in declaring how they should celebrate his birthday. He kicks the door shut with the heel of his shoe; he grabs hold of her shoulders and pulls her into his embrace. She feels to herself: “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). She can feel him distinctly as she becomes a captive to Nikhil’s advances. Fifteen minutes later, Nikhil goes out of her house. She has no desire to move, as she wants to taste the sweet mirth in her mind. She wants to lie there for the rest of life relishing what takes place between her and Nikhil. The doorbell rings repeatedly, but she does not have the slightest desire to see who that person is. L.Sonia Ningthoujam in her article, “Traditional Woman Versus Modern Woman: A Study of Shobha De’s Novels” describes how Maya searches for a solution to her inevitable problems saying: “The real solution to her could not be found. The traditional woman suffered disadvantage. In De’s novels, the disadvantaged women break all those bonds and norms that delimit their freedom to fulfil their dreams and desires” (40).
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” (\textit{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 own order to accomplish her dreams.

When Maya is involved in a sexual encounter with Nikhil, she forgets her self having lost her original identity. Maya looks at the clock and notices it is past one O’clock. The maids obviously ring the bell and depart. The thought that she never looks this beautiful again for her own husband fills her with an overwhelming sadness. Then she hears Ranjan’s voice calling out. She rushes to the door open it but fails to notice the discarded bouquet. It is the first thing Ranjan spots, when he walks angrily past her. Before she can ask him how his mother is, he enquires who presents the bouquet to her. She replies that they are meant for his mother but he is unconvinced. She starts asking about his mother bringing home in order to divert his attention for which she becomes successful. In her newly awakened state, she is dying again with Nikhil so that she craves to share her feelings with him. She is ready to make any kind of deal with the Almighty at that moment. She prays to God to make Nikhil hers,
though she never believes Him. It is the struggle how some women face, when they 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 demonstrate much courage to fulfil their desires, when men restrict them robbing their freedom. 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. At home, Maya feels she starts making plans to monitor Maya’s every move and phone call. Maya wishes to beat her at the game to meet Nikhil once. 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 gets a seat in Rochester university. Then a loud cry emanates from her constricted throat, holding Nikhil’s engagement invitation. Maya stands transfixed till Ranjan comes out of the kitchen to inform her that the chicken sour has been burnt. She leans against the refrigerator to steady herself as her body is shaking with glee. Then she looks at the spilled soup; she knows she will have to make it again from scratch as she has all the time in the world. Jaydipsinh Dodia in his article, “Second Thoughts: A critique” criticizes the institution of marriage in India as: “In Second Thoughts, Shobha De vividly presents an “explosive tale of love and betrayal” at the surface level and the “hollowness and hypocrisy” lurking
behind Indian traditional marriages at the deeper level. Thus the novel focuses on the hollowness of Indian marriage” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 281)

It is not easy for an Indian woman writer like Shobha De who has explored the reality concealed in Indian marriages by exposing wives’ adaptability according to the existing norms. When she is fettered in the clutches of her husband, devoid of freedom all through her life, leads to estrangement in the traditionally enveloped society.