3.1 Preliminaries

Shobha De is one of the most popular writers in Indian English literature. A highly controversial writer, she is one of those contemporary women novelists whose works have placed her on great heights of commercial success. Almost all her novels deal with realistic and metaphorical portrayal of different aspects of feminine sensibility. Shobha De’s novels focus on the urban women belonging to the elite class. De voices their stresses and strains in a society which is on the path of transition from tradition to modernity. While writing about the high class society, she presents shocking truths about women’s persecution and exploitation, marginalization and commoditization thus raising vital questions on the identity of women in modern world.

The present chapter is devoted to the study of two of De’s widely discussed novels- *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts*. The study takes into its fold an analysis of the themes, and indulges in insightful reading of the male and female characters. While doing so, it attempts to trace the journey of the female protagonists in their search for ‘self’.

3.2 Thematic Analysis of ‘Socialite Evenings’

Shobha De, a model cum journalist made her foray into the world of fiction with her first novel *Socialite Evenings* in the year 1998. The novel unfolds the story of Karuna, a prominent socialite in the erstwhile city of Bombay (Mumbai) who tries to escape from the nightmare of a broken marriage and failed relationships.
Utterly disillusioned with life, she sets forth in her quest for self. In the words of a prominent feminist S. P. Swain, the novel is a picture of marginalization of Indian women.

He further adds that Shobha De, in the novel,

...expresses the picture of woman not only as protagonist but also as motivating factors in society, initiating and regulating their own life as well as the lives of others in the voluptuously fascinating world of Bombayites, its enticing glitter and glamour enamoring many a Karuna’s to its ensnaring and captivating gossamer\(^1\) (128)

A woman is never assigned an autonomous status. Indian society, being patriarchal in nature has always placed women in a secondary position. This is evident in the words from Anushashan Parva which when translated reads as follows:

*All her glorification, all her fulfillment lies in sacrificing her life and happiness for the sake of man in different forms--- father, husband and the son.*\(^2\)

But all the female characters of De are modern educated women who have their leanings with the upper middle class. They are women of substance, self-sufficient and free-spirited and have a new code of ethics like the women of the West. However, though they are a far cry from the women of ancient times, these modern society women are hapless and forsaken creatures who crave for identity with a desire to reach out for the sky. *Socialite Evenings* is thus the saga of its protagonist’s search for identity and selfhood. This also confirms the proposition of Rosalynd Miles who says that the “*novel has been and is a prime area for acts of definition and self-definition both personal and social*”\(^3\) (61). It is the story of the ‘New Woman’ and her transition from ignorance and innocence to awareness and experience. The novel is also a vivid portrayal of the institutions of family and marriage as seen in the wealthy classes of urban Indian elite society. De very
critically reflects upon the familial and marital relations through the lives of three prominent women from the high class society of Bombay. These women find themselves chained in discordant and loveless marriages. When they try to break themselves free from the shackles, they realize they have no appropriate place to go. The novel is a first person account where Karuna narrates the story of her life and that of her two friends. The novel uses a linear and flashback technique.

*Socialite Evenings* revolves around Karuna, a young woman who was born to traditional middle-class parents in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra. After her family shifts to Bombay, she befriends Anjali, a prominent socialite. It is in Anjali’s company that her entire world changes and she starts dreaming of a career in films. She marries a rich businessman but feels trapped in a hollow, loveless marriage because “he was just an average Indian husband-unexciting, uninspiring, untutored…” (SE 64-65). Karuna is soon weary of her marriage with a man who does not share her interests. Refusing to continue with her pregnancy, she aborts her baby only to be shocked to know later that she is not fit to conceive again. In her desire for freedom, she breaks her marriage and starts living independently with her parents. She ends up being a hollow woman of our modern wasteland. The novel, thus, traces the journey of the protagonist Karuna from a gauche middle-class girl to a self-sufficient independent woman.

Shobha De, who shot to fame with her very first literary creation, has endeavored to shatter the patriarchal hegemony and raise a voice of protest against male dominance in society. De’s ‘new woman’ is a deviant from the traditional image of women who are modeled on the Vedic or the Pre-Vedic woman. She presents her heroines as assertive women unlike the women of ancient times who took pride in being regarded as epitomes of suffering and sacrifice. But, though educated and modern, these women also suffer, however not in silence. The writer challenges the assumption that the rich urban women enjoy freedom, liberty and equal rights. She is not satisfied with their material prosperity but she challenges
the deep psychology of the male characters that use women as assets and treat them as their property. The writer is upset with the callous attitude of men and hates their stand-offish behavior. The two key words ‘equality’ and ‘liberation’ continue to evade these women. De makes conscious attempt to probe into the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women.

De points out the high-handed attitude of men towards women through the words of her chief protagonist Karuna who says,

*We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was “you don’t really count, except in the context of my priorities.” It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our head and four square meals a day* (69).

Consequently, the women are prompted to act according to their whims and fancies.

According to Shantha Krishnaswamy,

*Beauteous, intelligent, economically independent women, however rare and diligent they be, find it equally difficult to reach their full potential as human persons as their less fortunate sisters*\(^5\) (351).

*Socialite Evenings* is also a novel of women’s rebellion against the male-assigned roles and identities. Women in India have an age-old history of suffering. As long as women are ‘good’ and ‘virtuous’ they are deified. But the fact that she remains good and virtuous as long as she has the capacity to endure silently and unquestionably the atrocities of the male or the ruling patriarch also cannot be overlooked. The moment she refuses to blindly accept and follow the imposed order, she becomes the butt of foul indictments, emotional abuse, sentimental sacrilege, sexual distortions, submission and subjugation. De as a novelist who is aware of the incriminating male chauvinistic attitude, presents her heroines as women breaking the constraints of male oppression. She targets the conventional
mindset of Indian men, and allows her women to challenge the norms which impede their self-evolvement and self-perception in earnest hope that “Men will have to come to terms with woman power” (Shooting From the Hip 113) someday.

*Socialite Evenings* also presents a detailed account of the male characters and the manner in which they treat women. While Karuna’s husband makes her marital life empty, meaningless and boring, there is Krish Mukherjee, a hot-blooded Bengali rebel who seduces Karuna from their very first meeting only to make her realize that how “...shallow, exploitative, utterly ordinary” (191) he is by running away from responsibility in the much needed moments of her distress. Karuna’s husband treats her like a very valuable possession but when he feels he is losing her to his friend, he divorces her. It is then that Karuna realizes that nothing belongs to her after all.

Anjali, Karuna’s friend and confidante too is always in mess because of her ignorance and desires. She divorces her first husband Abe on account of a loveless and unhappy married life. Her second marriage to Kumar, a homosexual also is equally unsuccessful. Anjali finally seeks refuge in spiritualism and religion to find relief from her mundane existence. The gorgeous and vivacious Ritu’s story is a lesson for women who generally take life for granted. Moving away from two unsuccessful marriages, Ritu’s wayward and carefree lifestyle drives her to attempt suicide. Ultimately, it is in the lap of nature that her self-realization starts.

Shobha De favours the institution of marriage that is based on mutual understanding, respect and sense of sacrifice between spouses and upholds its sanctity. According to De, secret of peaceful and harmonious life lies in self-introspection, meditation and rumination over issues. De’s novel seeks to raise pertinent questions with respect to social inequality which is so rampant in society.
3.3 Female Characters in ‘Socialite Evenings’

De’s *Socialite Evenings* introduces us to a host of women characters. If we apply the concept of ‘gynocriticism’ and ‘feminist critique’ proposed by Elaine Showalter, we find there are more number of women in the novel than that of their male counterparts. The space shared by women is more and the novel explores the inner world of women characters. It takes us to the hidden or unexplored corners of their minds and makes us think. The novel is a reflection upon familial and marital relations. The women in *Socialite Evenings* suffer marginalization at the hands of their husbands, and rebel against the conventional image of woman created in society. They come out of the closets to establish their identity by breaking away from the stony silence of suffering. In this context Helene Cixous’ words are very pertinent. She observes:

*A male privilege can be seen in the opposition between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity*\(^7\) (288).

The novel has dealt in detail with the lives of three women characters: Karuna, Anjali and Ritu. There are other characters which are also worthy of discussion *viz.* Karuna’s mother, Swati, Charlie, Si, Amma, Anjala, etc.

3.3.1 Karuna

Karuna is the main character and the narrator of the novel. A prominent Bombay socialite, she wants to escape into the past from her nightmarish present. So she writes a memoir of her life in a linear and flashback style. Born in a traditional middle class family, Karuna who has to live through a very conventional upbringing resents the strict attitude of her father.
Why do you want to go to the cinema? Why can’t you stay at home and improve your mind? ... A person must have discipline and regular habits...Lights off at 10 P.M. Up at 5.30. No eating between meals. No ‘idle talk’ over the telephone. And no ‘unnecessary laughter’ (30).

Her mother had no say in the matters of Karuna and her sisters. Their father had laid down strict rules for his daughters. The mother “doesn’t have courage either to protect her daughter or challenge her husband.” (12-13). She ends up being a mere custodian of the girls. Even as a student, Karuna is drawn to the flashy life of a big city like Mumbai.

Karuna’s life changes dramatically after her family moves to Bombay. Here she befriends Charlie, who is feisty and free-spirited. She enjoys her freedom, wears sexy outfits and revels in the company of boys. Unlike the kind of life Charlie leads, Karuna’s life is more controlled and fettered.

It was like being in the bloody Army....One daughter shall become a lawyer; one daughter shall qualify as a teacher. And one shall be an IAS officer (12).

Karuna dreams of making a career in modeling and become a glitzy and glamorous socialite herself. But her father reminds her that girls from decent families do not take to advertising profession as models are considered as prostitutes. Her aspirations, being thwarted, she starts looking for satisfaction outside her home. Her hunger and quest “grew greater by the day for it was never fed” (15). She ends up being a problematic child both at home and in school. Karuna, who is firm in her decision to become a model, assures her father that she would not bring disgrace to him. She takes up a modeling assignment with a Delhi- based jewelry shop and in doing so, gives us a glimpse of the “New Woman of Independent India”8 (Mishra 330), who is “fearless, bright and eager to participate in work, in play” 9 (Schneider & Schneider 330).
De’s Karuna is a woman with a mind of her own. She is extremely clear about her choices and tells her mother that she would not like to be treated like a slave. Speaking forthrightly about her close friendship with Bunty, she asks her mother,

*What do you think it is that we will do in the darkness that we can’t do during the daytime? (22)*

Her mother is shocked to hear such a remark. Karuna enjoys reading ‘Playboy’ a porn magazine and even brings a copy for her sisters. Her sisters are impressed by her guts. Her unabashed use of words like ‘Fuck studies’ is a shock to her sisters. She is not tamed. She watches porn movies and she smokes. She behaves exactly like boys do and is rebellious in her attitude much to the discontent of her conventional family.

**Karuna’s Relation with her Boy Friend**

Karuna is not a traditional girl who meekly follows her parent’s advice and acts according to their wishes. She is independent in both thought and action. Despite strong opposition from her family she takes to modeling. She gets engaged to Bunty, one of her co models in an advertising company. She likes his company and she visits him often. She even thinks of getting married to him some day. He too loves her a lot.

Karuna is a rational person who does not get carried away by emotions. She thinks about her life after marriage and finds it very bleak. She is not happy about Bunty living in a rented room and earning a very marginal salary. Always impressed by high class people she desires to lead the life of socialites. She establishes herself as a model, makes enough money and plans a virgin trip to foreign lands, free from all strings of family or friends. For the very first time she feels “adventurous and liberated” (50). She meets a Sindhi man, a complete stranger and loses her
virginity on this virgin trip. Under his influence, Karuna breaks off her engagement with Bunty, her “loving, affectionate, accommodating” (51) boyfriend.

**Karuna’s Decision to Visit America: Her Desire for ‘Space’**

Karuna’s life undergoes a theatrical change with Anjali’s entry into it. Enamored by her beauty and grace, her lissome figure and vivacity and overawed with her career in modeling, Karuna dreams of following her footsteps someday. She starts working for her shows and even accompanies her to socialite parties. It is in one of these parties, she meets a TV Ad maker. He praises her beauty and tells her that he loves her. She is confused but she likes his comments. Later she plans to go to America and see the world. On her return from the USA she very sternly and with a firm conviction tells Bunty, her boyfriend, “You know – SPACE - I need my own space. I feel claustrophobic. I need to find myself.” (55) Karuna’s quest for ‘identity’ begins with her maiden trip to foreign shores, all alone. Her ‘search’ for ‘self’ underlies the principle enshrined in the Chhandyog yopnishada which reads as *Ekam Gyatem Sarvam Gyatam Bhavati* which is very similar to the Chinese proverb, “one who knows himself knows others.”10 (Fergusson 214) Elaborating on her intention behind her brave sojourn to unknown lands Karuna rues, “I was going to find out about myself.” (SE. 54)

**Karuna’s Unhappy Marriage**

Karuna married her senior from college. While in college itself he had proposed to her. He later disclosed to her that he wanted to go to America for further studies. On returning from the USA, he took over his family business. He was very rich and Karuna accepted the marriage proposal. Theirs was a quick marriage. Karuna entered into a fanciless and fancy-free marriage “pushed by an acceptable male
who wouldn’t take no for an answer” (58), and unfortunately landed up in an empty, boring and meaningless relationship.

Karuna’s husband is very authoritative and orthodox. His thoughts about women are traditional. He does not care for her feelings. After a year or so her position in her husband’s house and family becomes almost insignificant. She is “studiously excluded from the cozy mother-and-son dinner business chats” (63). He uses her as a toy for his entertainment. She finds him dull, boring and unemotional. Her life becomes colourless. She confesses,

My marriage went sour because I had married the wrong man for the wrong reason at the wrong time. My husband was not a villain. He was just an average Indian husband- unexciting, uninspiring, and untutored (73).

Karuna feels lonely and turns to books. Her husband’s intentional neglect infuriates her. Though she behaves like a “well-trained Indian wife” (32), nothing actually changes. Her husband continues to neglect her emotional and physical needs. He ceases from being a complete husband material and Karuna is forced to live like an alien in her own house. Lack of trust and understanding between spouses reduces Karuna and women like her to “dependent dolls” (69). Also, lamenting on Karuna’s dissatisfaction with her loveless, joyless and bridgeless married life, the message that Shobha De tries to convey through the novel is akin to P. N. Tickoo’s argument.

Marriage is not all love. The grand edifice of happy married life is based upon genuine love, deep respect, gratitude and sense of duty towards others (72).

De, through her protagonist Karuna, also raises questions on equality for womankind in the existing system of values. She rues, “when will our women be in a position to regulate and negotiate sexual intercourse in marriage on their terms?” (28)
Karuna was not even happy about her husband’s style of love making. She says,

*Our love making (If I could call it that) was a listless affair. We would lie there in the bedroom…neither the words nor the tone did anything allay the disgust I usually felt. But it was simpler to just to get on with the damn thing and have it over and done as fast as possible. I would lie there staring at the ceiling as he pounded away* (76).

Karuna finally rebels and resolves not to play a maid to him anymore. Completely unsure about the longevity of her marriage, she doesn’t even desire a child as she believes that it is always the children who suffer from a broken marriage. Karuna doesn’t subscribe to the dictum of “*silence is the best defense*” (180).

Rather, she very unmitigatingly tells her husband,

*I think our marriage was over the day our honeymoon started. We have got nothing going. I don’t love you - never have* (184), *because of his “smugness and irritating mannerism.”* (185) *and the way he takes for granted.*

Karuna represents women from high class society and it is perhaps through her tale that De wants to throw light upon the all-pervading malady of lack of communication between spouses which is widely witnessed in our cosmopolitan towns and cities. Man’s pre-occupation with status, success and wealth often drives him to loneliness in relationships. According to a psychologist Eric Fromm such a condition is directly responsible for many of the mental illnesses seen among men from modern era. Absence of progeny also breathes discordant notes between married couples and is also a potent cause that breeds permissiveness. Also life for women like Karuna is not all about material comforts alone. Though their basic needs are fulfilled but they remain hungry for their need of self respect, self esteem and desire for identity.
Karuna’s Relation with Krish, her Pregnancy and Divorce

Karuna meets Krish, her husband’s friend at a party. He happens to be a lively person who had “flirted with all the right things - poetry, theatre and politics.” (164) Introduced by her husband as “a great guy” (168) she finds him “a shy, sensitive, mixed up man whom she ‘instantly’ fell in love with.” (168) Krish too starts seducing Karuna by offering her ‘chameli gajra’ and by appreciating her feet as having lot of ‘character’ in them. A pretentious adman, Krish invites Karuna to a theatre workshop and thus begins a “torrid affair” (170) between them conducted through letters much to the obliviousness of her husband.

Karuna’s story is that of a neglected wife who is swept off her feet at the slightest instance of being made to feel important and special as a woman. The void in her marriage is filled by Krish’s presence in her life until her husband becomes aware of her adulterous affair. In fact, Karuna’s husband Black Label forces Krish upon her and sends her on a foreign trip with him to prove his liberal attitude in order to seek justification to his sexual laxities. Karuna’ stupidity ends soon as she realizes that Krish actually is “a shallow, exploitative, utterly ordinary, no he is even less than that, human being” (191). Black Label accepts her back in his life. But the crisis in Karuna’s life begins with her pregnancy which becomes the reason of discord between the couple. Karuna’s husband not only disowns the unborn child saying, “It cannot be mine anyway!” (215) but also divorces her. Karuna is left utterly depressed and dejected, having endured the pangs of a sour marriage on one hand and the painful guilt from an adulterous relation with a man who is a sort of opportunist on the other. She finds herself on the streets, since her parents also turn antagonistic towards her. Unperturbed by her pains and pangs they reprimand her saying,

What you have done is totally unacceptable, nobody in our family has done it before, nobody will do it in the future. You’ve made the mistake, now you pay the price (219).
Thus, Karuna’s parents absolve themselves of any responsibility and leave her to fend for herself and face the atrocities of the male world.

**Karuna’s Friendship with Anjali and Ritu**

The novel *Socialite Evenings* deals with the social and personal lives of women. The author has focused on the lives of three important women characters. The relation among these three characters is very interesting. Karuna meets Anjali in Bombay and they become good friends. She starts modeling for Anjali’s fashion shows. Karuna is very impressed in the beginning with the high society lifestyle of Anjali and is in awe of her. She later comes to know that Anjali is not happy and her husband tortures her a lot. Karuna and Anjali are very intimate friends and they share everything with each other. They find each other’s company very comfortable and they are always ready to help each other in the hours of need.

When Anjali meets Karuna, she is initially envious of her. But later, she discovers a confidante in Karuna to whom she can disclose all her secrets. She shares all her agonies and problems about her relationship with her husband. Anjali grows very protective about Karuna. She does not approve of her husband showing interest in Karuna and tells him to spare her. In the beginning Anjali is not ready to take her to the socialite parties. Once during a beach party she takes care to see whether Karuna has an appropriate dress to wear for the occasion. She shares her jewelry with Karuna when they attend parties. She is a bit possessive and she does not like it when the TV producer takes interest in Karuna. She accuses her of stealing her boyfriend.

Karuna likes Anjali right from the time she meets her. She is highly impressed by her standard of living, her car, her makeup, etc. When Anjali invites her to her house, she dreams of leading a similar life herself. Whenever Anjali finds a new boyfriend, she first rushes to Karuna to share the news with her. She tells her
about her French boyfriend, Karan, Kumar, etc. When she gets married to Kumar and she discovers that Kumar is a gay, it is Karuna to whom she opens out her heart.

When Karuna’s husband divorces her and expels her out of his house, she is not accepted by her parents too. It is her friend Anjali who comes to her rescue then. Karuna goes through all her physical mental anxieties with only Anjali by her side. Anjali not only offers Karuna shelter in her house but also arranges a job for her, appraise her about different career opportunities and also offers partnership in her firm. It was in Arun’s party that Karuna is of great help to Anjali. When the writer asks Anjali to dance with him and later tries to molest her, it is Karuna who rushes to free Anjali from the clutches of Arun. They return from the party emotionally bruised by the incident.

Ritu is Anjali’s friend. Karuna meets Ritu through Anjali. Ritu is also a socialite and she too has relations with many men. She flouts conventional codes and norms. It is Ritu who advises Karuna on how to use men. She uses her sex appeal as a means to get men to act according to her wish and happens to be an expert in the art of controlling men. Karuna and Ritu often spend time together and they share details of each other’s lives.

**Karuna’s Efforts to Establish her Identity**

De’s *Socialite Evenings* is replete with women characters. The novel deals with the journey of life of all its female protagonists, their agonies and anxieties, their sufferings and their struggle for dignity, self-respect and identity in a male-dominated society. In Indian culture a girl’s identity depends on the men. They are controlled by their fathers first, husbands later and in the last stage by their sons. The patriarchal framework in society offers no power to women. Though it is true that women have acquired social power in the past few decades when
compared to older times in history, yet they have relatively little of it when compared to the men. In this context, Bharati Patnaik avers -

_De as a feminist writer is resolved to make men realize that women are biologically pre-disposed to strength, rationality, intellectual autonomy, and such qualities which were not hitherto considered as their prerogative._

It is common notion that power or identity can be established with means like money, profession, assets and property. Empowerment of women in all respect is essential to evade subjugation by men. None of the women in the novel have such assets. They depend on their husbands for all their needs. Dependency on the men and leading life in illusion blurs their vision and makes them ignorant about their identity. However, Karuna being bold, rebellious and revolutionary bravely fights against all odds in order to establish her identity. She is resolute and takes her own decisions in life.

When Karuna’s marriage breaks and she finds herself on the streets, she is frustrated and dejected by the sudden turn of events in her life. But she encounters all the problems that come along bravely. In fact she engages in a _“poor battle of survival”_ (32) so as to assert her identity and existence as human beings and more so as equal to men. She takes up odd jobs, works with an advertising agency as a script writer. She earns only a meager income and life becomes a tale of hardships when she has to travel by bus, spend endless hours in long queues and be a part of the people squabbling over small change and petty issues. Karuna had never ever seen such a life but these experiences are too trivial to dampen her spirits. She refuses to be cowed down by difficulties and odds that shroud her life. This is perhaps her phase of self-realization when she learns that a woman has no one to turn to but herself. Exasperating times in her life make Karuna search her ‘self’, her mind, and her motto and the ways of the world. Much around this time, she
meets Girish Sridhar, the famous art film-maker who offers her a role in the film *Shakuntala* which she refuses to enjoy her “little patch of independence” (255).

Karuna meets several men who try to be friendly with her. Some of them even offer her marriage proposals. She too is not averse to the attention she gets from the men around her. She is quite friendly with Shridhar, the film-maker. A widower himself, he finds Karuna suitable to be his second wife. His son Kunal also endears to her. On her part, Karuna also enjoys Girish Sridhar’s company and they work together in writing the script of Shakuntal. She even prepares one advertisement with Kunal and grabs the Best Ad of the Year award. Karuna attains success in her profession, name and fame. Shridhar shows his keenness to marry her. However, Karuna resists all the temptations as her priorities have changed. “It wasn’t money or success I was looking forward to in my life” but “it is the freedom to do what I wanted” (273-74) She is emotionally moved by the pathetic condition of her parents. Karuna arrives at a conclusion to take care of her parents as a son would. She feels like a responsible daughter for the first time and resolves not to abandon them at the hour of their great need.

Karuna’s mother urges her to consider marriage again albeit with the right man. A traditional woman, the mother believes that when a woman comes off age, her actual place is in her husband’s home and not her parents’. But Karuna is firm and sure about what she expects from life. Being quite capable of taking care of herself she very plainly announces her conviction to her mother.

Karuna now has, as Virginia Woolf says, ‘a room of her own’ and earns equal or rather more than a man. She sounds determined and sure when she says -

*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).*

With the passage of time, Karuna develops self-confidence. She is no longer intimidated by wolfish men which is evident when she snubs Varun, a very
powerful editor who indulges in mud-slinging and tries to defame her. The same aplomb is witnessed when Karuna rejects a very lucrative offer from a roving journalist Randhir Roy to figure in a documentary on the theme of ‘desi-lib movement.’ Thus, Karuna’s is the portrait of a modern, liberated woman, self-assured, courageous, upright, smart and active-someone who can scrupulously avoid being indolent and indecisive. She loves herself and she does not care for the world and what people think. She is able to liberate herself from the bad cultural norms and patriarchal pattern in society. She is in every way superior to all the women characters in the novel.

3.3.2 Anjali

_Socialite Evenings_ is the story of Anjali as seen through Karuna’s eyes. She is Karuna’s model friend, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. She belonged to a conservative middle class half Jain and half Hindu family. Her father was a doctor - a general practitioner. She had grown up in modest means in a small apartment located in one of the less posh localities of Bombay. She attended New Era School and that was why her English language proficiency was not good. Like most of the girls of her time, she took up the job of an air hostess in Air India. She was an independent girl who earned a nice salary and enjoyed her life. Karuna is drawn towards her on account of her self-assured personality and formal demeanor. She described Anjali to her sisters as “very tall and statuesque...she is very sophisticated....she dresses beautifully...” (4)

Anjali got married to Abbas Tayabji (Abe) at the age of nineteen. She had always taken her decisions and led her life on her own terms. She made her foray into the world of advertising and fashion designing to escape from the closed, boring, middle class environment. She always desired to be rich and independent, buy lovely clothes and perfumes meet people and travel all over the world. With the hope of making these rosy dreams of life come true, she married Abe who fails to
fulfill her desires. An incorrigible flirt with obdurate ways of life, Abe starts his day with a ‘scotch gargle’ and considers vegetarian food fit for milk producing animals only. A typical male he treats Anjali badly and assigns her a subservient position. Anjali feels claustrophobic and fatally suffocated in their marital relationship.

Anjali takes a most revolutionary decision in life by choosing to marry a Muslim. Unlike Karuna, she is a bold and assertive woman who believes in living life on her own terms with no fears or thought of the world. Though the world sees her as a happy woman, in reality, she nurses a wounded heart. She confides all her problems in Karuna who is a very good friend of hers. Anjali even warns Karuna to be away from Abe.

Anjali is a woman who gives importance to materialistic and sensual pleasures. Impressed by her self-confidence and maturity Karuna looks up to Anjali as her ideal and idol from the time they meet. But Anjali ends up being in mess on account of her craving for sensual pursuits. Having gone through a series of relationships, she turns to religion and spiritualism to escape from her mundane existence.

**Anjali’s Divorce and her Relation with her Boyfriends**

Though Anjali was a strong woman and capable of taking her decisions on her own, she admits to Karuna that she can’t live without a man. When Abe divorces her, she feels very sad and dejected. She spends her days in sorrow.

Though she has enough money she feels that she needs the support of a man. She confesses,

*I can’t, darling. I need a man. How can I go to club alone? What about parties, clubs and plays. I hate to walk into a room without a man next to me.* (72)
To kill time she joins French language classes. She meets a French man there and she finds herself in love with him. When Anjali shares the news of her affair with Karuna, she advises her to live on her own as she has enough resources and is an independent woman. Sometime later we find her in love with a young boy about twenty five years old. His name is Karan and Anjali meets him in a gym. She finds him very attractive and irresistible. She desires that he make love to her. When he does not oblige, and leaves her alone, Anjali is frustrated and accuses him of using her money and cheating her. Karuna reminds Anjali that the boy is almost of the same age that of Mini, her daughter.

Further on, she falls in love with a government officer and they spend some good time together. However, he soon becomes very possessive about Anjali and he starts curbing her freedom. Anjali feels irked and disappointed when he insults her and praises his wife. The affair ends and she finds herself lonely again.

Anjali commits the second mistake of her life by marrying Mr. Kumar, a homosexual. Kumar uses Anjali as “a front” (125) in society. He does not believe in having sex before marriage as he considers sex a very sacred thing. Anjali too is impressed by his stand. But Karuna and Ritu mockingly tell her that Kumar may be a gay. Anjali’s marriage to Kumar is a grand occasion. Her daughter too comes down from USA to attend the marriage. Anjali is very happy as everything works out as planned. Kumar’s second wife has divorced him without any arguments and Anjali and Kumar get married legally without any hindrance.

But, Anjali’s wedding night turns out to be a nightmare when she discovers that her husband is a gay. She is further horrified to learn that he is in a relationship with a young boy, Murthy. In spite of all his shortcomings, Anjali finds Kumar nice and understanding. She understands his limitations and accepts him the way he is. When Anjali is badly treated in Varun’s party, Kumar disappears from the scene instead of coming to her rescue. Strangely though, Anjali is not upset
with him because she is aware that Kumar does not know how to handle such situations. She starts taking interest in her business of interior decoration which soon begins to flourish. She earns good money but unable to lead a proper and happy married life, turns to spiritualism for peace and solace. The religious transformation in Anjali is no doubt shocking. Very candidly she reveals to Karuna:

*What is sex compared to religion? Nothing! The ecstasy I experience when I'm praying or listening to my bhajans is far better than an orgasm. I'm into this totally, and sex has become irrelevant. In fact, I hate to use the sort of language we used to—fuck-shuck and all that. I feel impure.* (140)

Anjali is a true friend and a very sensitive girl. Her parents also forgive her for all her past mistakes and her family is once again happy and united. Anjali’s journey of life is very interesting. She is seen running from pillar to post in search of peace and happiness that forever evades her. Finally, she clears our illusion that a woman can be happy only in the company of a man. She discovers happiness in work and in religion. Through Anjali’s saga, De tells her readers that one should choose a life of simplicity and spend time in self-introspection to find eternal happiness and peace.

**3.3.3 Ritu**

Another significant character in *Socialite Evenings* is that of the gorgeous and vivacious Ritu. She is a sadomasochist and possesses the art of enticing men of all ages. She strongly believes that ‘sex’ can be manipulated and advises Karuna to enjoy a boring husband at home and have fun with an exciting lover outside. Ritu knows how to use her husband’s money and make him buy anything she wishes. She is very bold and sexy. She gets into a relationship with Karan, Anjali’s ex-boyfriend.
When compared to Karuna and Anjali, Ritu is maritally settled. Unfortunately her marriage fails to offer little bliss. She leaves her husband for a smuggler named Gul with whom she enjoys an extra-marital affair. It is with Gul that Ritu finds her true self.

_Gul is the best thing that could have happened to me...I feel I have taken my first major step-whatever the consequences...I want to see how this arrangement works first. I’m not such a fool...I’m having a wonderful time-and that’s what matters (219)._  

However, Ritu is utterly disillusioned with Gul’s behavior that cheapens her by making her his pimp for “procuring virgins for him and his friends” (220). Frustrated of living a despicable and servile life, she makes half-hearted suicide attempt by consuming a handful of pills along with whisky. Ritu is saved on time by Gul and his henchmen. Without an iota of guilt, remorse or regret she later returns to her husband who accepts her unquestioningly. Together they go off to the hills for two months to get away from all the sordid memories. Ritu’s self-realization takes place in the lap of nature. She worships “Original Earth Mother” who has a balmy and soothing effect on her.

De presents Ritu as a woman who knows how to cash in on opportunities. In Karuna’s words -

_The best part about Ritu was that while she enjoyed every nugget of the attention she got, she didn’t use the power she had over men the way some women did. For her it was all just fun (218)_

Ritu is a socialite who subscribed to the dictum of fun and merriment alone. An independent woman, she did not believe in deep and long-lasting relationships. Practical and calculating that she is, she knew the art of wielding the men in her life. This is seen from her advice to Karuna -
Be like me. Pretend. Call your husband ‘darling’, at least in front of his friends. Pamper him in public—All this works like jaadu...men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment. It was a lesson I would never forget (218).

3.3.4 Swati - Karuna’s Sister

We are introduced to Swati when Karuna goes to London in order to meet Krish. It is Swati who handles the situation when Karuna’s husband comes to accuse her of her disloyalty. Swati gives her a word of caution that she should not start the topic. Rather she should expect it to come from him. She supports Karuna and she wants her to meet Krish. As soon as Karuna comes to know about her pregnancy, she dials Swati for help. Swati advises her to get the child aborted and even arranges for a doctor. She understands Karuna and her agonies.

Karuna and her sisters had a strict upbringing and led much disciplined lives in their childhood. Her mother always taught them to be good girls. Karuna one day brought a magazine—‘Playboy’ that had pictures of nude women in it. It was Swati who blurted out that she had seen the boobs of the washer man’s wife and hers were bigger than in the photographs. She always respected the wishes of her father. She got married and moved to London. It is later understood that her husband had cheated on her and got into an extra-marital relationship with one of the British girls. Finally Swati divorced her husband and instead of coming back to India she decided to stay back in London with her daughter. Swati is an independent, working woman and very strong. She is a deviant from the traditional image of woman. She represents the New Age Woman - empowered and self-reliant. She is also one among those women who endure pain but do not succumb to it. Rather they come out of their cocoons and try to establish their identity in a male-dominated world.
3.3.5 Charlie

Charlie was Karuna’s classmate in her school. They were good friends and often shared their secrets. She is very bold and brave. She enjoys her life, is liberated and has even had the experience of kissing a boy while still in school. She tells Karuna that she loves a Muslim boy and an Anglo-Indian. Charlie is carefree and flamboyant. She whistles like boys and Karuna’s father finds it irritating and annoying.

It was Charlie who passed on the porn magazines to Karuna. She declares very proudly that she had sex with the Anglo boy. She even makes it clear to Karuna that it was she who had taken the lead and even taught him how to do it. She is not worried about pregnancy. Karuna’s parents do not like her. They warn Karuna and strictly tell her not to have any relation with Charlie. It is through Charlie’s uncle that Karuna gets a break as a model and meets Bunty, her first boyfriend.

3.3.6 Karuna’s Mother

There are some women characters in the novel that belong to the older generation. They are relatively more traditional and take delight in remaining confined to their houses. Karuna’s mother conducts herself in keeping with her father’s wish. She listens to the radio when he goes to office. She takes care of all his needs. She works as a mediator between the daughters and their father. The girls prefer to communicate to him through their mother.

Karuna’s mother is a simple woman who is bound by patriarchal system. After Karuna is divorced from her first husband, her mother advises her to settle down again. She tells Karuna, “Take your time, but marry. And marry the right one - that is important” (275).

Karuna’s mother belongs to the generation that upholds marriage as a sacred institution. She believes in the old school of thought that maintains, it is hard for a
woman to stay single as society is very cruel and that only a man who is her husband can provide her the much needed security and a home that she can call her own.

3.3.7 Karuna’s Mother in Law

Karuna’s mother in law is a very strong woman who keeps watch on her daughter in law. She does not like Karuna as a woman who is capable of rational thinking. She even dislikes her friends Anjali and Ritu. It annoys her when she sees Karuna reading books. Karuna’s husband is not aware of Karuna’s affair with Krish. However, it is Karuna’s mother-in-law who keeps a watch on the telephone bills and notices the long distance calls enlisted there. She even finds Krish’s love letters in Karuna’s wardrobe. It is on her suggestion that her son seeks a divorce from Karuna.

Karuna’s mother-in-law is a cunning and shrewd woman. When her son marries for the second time, the marriage is an unhappy one. At this juncture Karuna’s husband requests her to return to them. The mother-in-law is found to be instrumental in intruding on her daughter-in-law’s privacy thereby ruining their life.

3.3.8 Karuna’s Younger Sister

De introduces Karuna’s younger sister to the readers as the invalid daughter in the family. The novelist gives more attention to her in the second half of the novel. Not much is spoken about her in the first part of the story. It is mentioned that when she got her periods for the first time; she started crying and insisted on her father being called. She was not mentally prepared and hence failed to handle it. She kept on crying that she was dying and her father blamed her mother for not taking good care of her. She never made any friends and was always silent and passive. She had no boyfriends and never discussed such topics. The novelist very
fleetinglly mentions about something having gone wrong with her at one of the picnics during a visit to their relative’s place. Although no one has any idea as to what went wrong, one thing is for sure that things changed seriously after that incident. The girl became hysterical and needed to be treated by a psychiatrist. Karuna and her parents felt worried about her.

She is one woman character in the novel that is seen to be in a most pathetic state. She does not marry and neither does the family encourage her to do so. The family has to cope up with the enormous burden of an invalid daughter. It is Karuna who resolves to look after her family as a caring daughter in their times of perpetual struggle.

3.3.9 Minor Female Characters in ‘Socialite Evenings’

There are other women characters also like Mataji, Jerrobai, Shireen, Savitri, Gujarati Flower girls and other women at the parties. All these women also have different problems. Mataji is portrayed as the really dangerous one as she goes about providing young girls for Babaji. She is the most venomous woman character that the reader encounters in the novel. Absolutely devoid of morals and ethics she acts as a pimp picking up girls to be offered to Babaji to appease his sexual pleasures.

We are also introduced to two Parsi women in the novel. When Karuna is divorced and starts living as a paying guest, we meet Jerrobai and her daughter Shireen. Jerrobai is a widow. She is worried about her daughter’s obesity. She has a servant named Savitri, who cooks and cleans. An interesting incident occurs when Krish visits Karuna at her paying guest accommodation. Jerrobai tells Karuna that males are not allowed as it will cast bad influence on her daughter.
3.4 Male Characters in ‘Socialite Evenings’

Shobha De is one of those widely discussed writers whose novels are unbridled narrations of the lives of people belonging to the high strata in society. She has portrayed life of popular film stars, businessmen, models, artists and fashion designers. She is the first woman writer who writes about sexual relations very frankly and with ease. She has the courage to write about homosexuality and other such social aspects which are ideally considered to be taboo. She not only understood the psyche of women but also delves deep into the minds of men and come out with insightful observations. Her male characters are life like and we find them as if they are part and parcel of our lives. One can easily connect with these characters. Her novels are said to deal more with sexuality and sexual behavior but they are more than that with a touch of realism in it.

*Socialite Evenings* is an interesting rendering of a variety of characters. There are traditional, modern, postmodern, and cunning and all sorts of men that we get to meet in the novel. First we meet Karuna’s father and he represents the traditional patriarchal father. He has laid out a set of well defined rules for himself that he adheres to in the upbringing of his daughters. He takes good care of his daughters but curbs their freedom. He does not like them making noise and they are not allowed to walk out of the house after 7 pm. He does not like Karuna working as a model because he doesn’t look at it as a good profession for girls from decent families.

He says:

*In our times girls learned how to cook, knit, crochet, embroider, make rangolis. We called such activities hobbies. Yes, some girls these days collect stamps or learn drawing. But what you are doing is not a hobby (32).*
He had even chalked out the profession he desired his daughters to choose in future. He is the formidable patriarch with total control over his house and family. His daughters can’t talk to him directly. They use their mother as a mediator for communicating with their father. He does not like the girls whistling and going to the cinema. He only allowed them to read literary books. He is unhappy with Karuna’s rebellious nature.

Then there is Bunty, Karuna’s first boyfriend. He is a simple boy and loves Karuna a lot. He takes her to the bhel stall and offers her panipuri. They enjoy four years of courtship. He is a poor boy trying his best to settle in life. He completes his MBA and joins a company. Karuna is not happy with his economic condition and she rejects his marriage proposal.

Karuna’s husband represents a typical traditional husband. He does not approve of his wife being able to indulge in rational thinking. He perceives his wife as a toy in his hands, who will dance to his tunes. He expects her to accompany him to parties in the evening and be happy at that. He gets furious when he learns that Karuna has cheated him by having an affair with his old friend, Krish. He goes to London and tells Karuna that he will divorce her. De portrays him as a shrewd and cunning man who himself enjoys an extra-marital affair with a woman called Winnie. When Karuna’s husband seeks a divorce on the pretext of Karuna being adulterous, she lets him have it easily so as to be free from the trap of meaningless marriage that lacks communication between the spouses.

Abbas Tayabjee who is popularly known as Abe is a rich businessman. He has the habit of using women. It was Anjali’s brother who used to arrange girls for him. In the course of time he meets Anjali and gets married to her. Abe believes in experimenting with sex. He stoops to the extent of taking nude pictures of his wife Anjali. A wealthy playboy, Abe has sexual relationship with almost all friends of Anjali. However, Anjali shields her best friend Karuna from his perverse
intentions. Yet, Abe doesn’t shy away from making an indecent proposal to Karuna. He is a brute, completely devoid of feelings. He is a typical male who perceives woman as an object of sexual pleasure and enjoyment alone. Though he divorces Anjali, he carries out his economic responsibility towards his wife and daughter. Perhaps, this is the only positive streak to his personality.

Kumar is another important character in the novel; and he is the most different one too. He is already married twice before he proposes to marry Anjali. He appears as a man with sound morals when he refuses the idea of sex before marriage. The truth of the statement becomes clear when we are made aware that in reality, Kumar is a homosexual and is in relationship with a boy called Murthy. Though his marriage with Anjali is a farce, he turns out to be a caring husband. He gives complete freedom to Anjali and strangely though, even encourages her to have sex outside marriage. Kumar finally gets into a business where he promotes Babaji and organizes religious programs for him. Krish and Karuna’s husband were friends from their college days. Krish was a Marxist and he supported the activities of left parties. He was a revolutionary. De rightly describes him as “a hot-blooded Bengali rebel from the late 60s” (164). He took keen interest in poetry, politics and theatre and organized acting workshops. He was married to a rich landlady and enjoyed life. His entry into Karuna’s life is through her husband when he introduces her to Krish at a party. The attraction between Krish and Karuna is instant and soon they are in love. Krish uses all his skills to seduce Karuna and they enjoy a discrete affair conducted through letters for three long years right under the nose of Karuna’s husband. Krish plans to meet Karuna in Venice for a romantic rendezvous.

Krish visits Karuna frequently and they make love. When Karuna is pregnant and her husband discovers her adultery, Krish shies away from her and deserts Karuna to fend for herself. Urvashi Barat as quoted by Shashi Kant Gupta observes that -
Men like Krish is an example of ‘green-world’ lover. “who is certainly no ideal non-patriarchal man-- no man in De’s fictional world ever is-- unconsciously and unintentionally he is the precipitating factor behind her realization that the woman has no one to turn to but herself” 13 (37-38).

Karan is another young man who comes into the lives of Anjali and Ritu. He meets Anjali in a gym and they become friends. Karan, who is much younger than Anjali makes her go mad for him. They go to Delhi together, and there he rejects her advances to make love. Later, Karan is attracted to Ritu. They engage in love making. Karan belongs to the category of men who lure wealthy women, enjoy their company and money and finally desert them.

De also acquaints us with hypocrites like Babaji. He pretends to be a religious man but in reality under the guise of religion, he exploits women and young girls. Presence of men like Murthy and Kumar exposes pretentious men in society and draws our attention to deviant sexual behavior and practices. The novel also brings to fore the reality of men in media. One realizes the power of media over men and women. Varun uses his influence in media to cheat people. He causes much mental agony to Karuna when he tries to defame her publicly by printing the news of Karuna’s affair with both Girish Sridhar, the father and Kunal, his son. Girish represents a nice man who respects women and treats them as companions. He falls in love with Karuna and wants to marry her. Karuna too likes him but she rejects his offer as her priority at that juncture is to shoulder the responsibility of her parents. Kunal is portrayed as a sensitive and polite young man who takes the marriage proposal of his father to Karuna.

Socialite Evenings is Shobha De’s first novel in which she has dished out a mixed platter of characters consisting of different kinds of men and women and their idiosyncrasies. The novel talks about the problems of high class urban women.
The men in the novel take women for granted and they treat them as an asset which they seem to own. They undermine their capacity as individuals. The sanctity of marriage as a holy institution is often violated. Extra-marital affairs seem to be a part and parcel of their lives and divorce comes to them easily without any emotional attachments. Also, there are different rules for men and women when it comes to morality.

3.5 Portrayal of ‘Self’ of Female Protagonists in ‘Socialite Evenings’

Shobha De’s novels deal with the quest for identity or ‘self’ in the women characters and Socialite Evenings is no option. De portrays her women as self-assured and self-reliant people with an awareness of their independence, individuality and identity. The novel deals with the journey of its three female protagonists: Anjali, Karuna and Ritu and their search for ‘self’. All the three women live in illusion that marriage will bring them their desired self-esteem and bestow upon them the rights to lead lives as respected individuals in the company of their husbands. In a society that prides itself in superiority of men, women are treated as subalterns in every stage of life. Their childhood is controlled by their father, youth by their husbands and old age by their sons. Karuna’s childhood is full of compromises and hardships. As a child, her freedom is curbed by her father who in the name of discipline doles out a long list of do’s and don’ts for his daughters. They were never allowed to watch movies or meet their friends after seven in the evening or even touch the radio. Marriage too hardly offers her any solace because of complete ‘lack of communication’ with her husband.

All the three women are brave and they decide to explore the world on their own. They are not bothered about society, religion or the people. They live life on their terms. Anjali gets married to a Muslim and she is most carefree in her behavior. She indulges in an adulterous act in order to escape from a meaningless marriage.

When Abe decides to divorce Anjali, Karuna says,
Why don’t you fix that bastard- just leave him. You don’t need the guy. You are doing OK. You have got a place of your own. Why do you need even another man in your life? Why can’t you do this for yourself and on your own? (62)

All these women go through hardships in life, yet try to establish their identity. Karuna is divorced and she starts life afresh. Though she comes across men who offer her marriage and her mother too pushes her to marry, she rejects the idea of a second marriage and prefers to live on her own. She enjoys economic independence and her family members also support her way of life.

Ritu tries to find happiness in the company of men. But she is disillusioned when her lover, Gul leaves her and goes off with another young lady. She tries to commit suicide but she is saved. Ritu also reconciles to her new life which she finds very interesting.

The search for ‘self ’of De’s female protagonists is an arduous task. Initially they seem immature, helpless, and agonized. But with experience and realization of their true potential, they don the garb of a ‘New Woman.’ Thus it becomes evident that true emancipation is possible only through self-introspection, meditation, and rumination.
SECOND THOUGHTS

3.6 Search for ‘Self’ of Female Protagonists in Shobha De’s
‘Second Thoughts’

The problem of search for identity or ‘self’ is intricately woven with issues related to the problem of existence. This has been a popular theme with most of the women writers of Indian fiction in English. Each one of them has tried to delineate this idea in their inimitable style. Shobha De is a popular columnist and journalist who has, in her frank and forthright manner depicted sensitive aspects of human life. Refusing to be labeled as a feminist, and preferring to be known as a humanist, she has attempted at bold and open-hearted narrations of problems faced by women in a culture that basks in the glory of male superiority.

Second Thoughts published in 1996 is Shobha De’s seventh novel in succession. The title of the novel brings to mind Simon De Beauvoir’s revolutionary text - ‘The Second Sex’. When looked at closely, it becomes apparent that, De, through the title of her novel refers to ‘first thoughts’ of a woman which are controlled and monitored by the rigid values and system prevalent in society. Her first thoughts about life are rife with hopes and aspirations, happiness and vigor. However, it is the system of patriarchy which renders her hapless and forsaken curtailing her desire for freedom and fulfillment. But when she realizes that it’s impossible to get happiness out of her first thoughts, she turns to ‘second thoughts’.

De’s Second Thoughts narrates the story of Maya. It reflects upon the hollowness of the conventional notions of the institutions of family and marriage. Maya’s marriage with Ranjan fails to bring in the bliss and happiness in her life that she dreamt of. Feeling stifled and desperate, she turns to Nikhil. It is in Nikhil’s lively company, which is a consequence of her ‘second thoughts’ that she experiences happiness and fulfillment. Maya’s marriage is devoid of charm and excitement. Ranjan, her husband is too pre-occupied with himself and his job as a promising
bank executive. Maya, his newly married wife feels lonely, bored and exasperated by Ranjan’s cold and distant attitude towards her. But when her heart starts brimming with thoughts of Nikhil’s love, she no longer feels bad about Ranjan’s impersonal attitude. She takes everything in her stride easily and even finds his behavior funny. She is happy and relaxed to know that that there is someone who loves her. This also makes her feel special. The feeling of inclusion is completed and the feeling of alienation is over. As Simon De Beauvoir says about marriage,

*Marriage is a fate traditionally sanctioned to women by society. But marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman.*

The novel, through its story of love and betrayal, exposes the barrenness and hypocrisy of Indian marriage system. De also exhibits her mature understanding of the female psyche and unveils the sad plight of women torn between the desire for individuality on one hand, and a sense of obligation on the other.

**3.7 Thematic Analysis of ‘Second Thoughts’**

Shobha De’s *Second Thoughts* is distinctly different from her earlier novels. De has replaced the high society world which formed the background of her previous novels with the middle-class society. The novel unfolds the saga of its protagonist Maya and traces her tumultuous journey as the wife of Ranjan. It focuses on the agonies experienced by Maya, her emotions and feelings and also her longings and desires on being trapped in a loveless marriage. The theme of the novel is very simple and deals with the persecution of women in the name of tradition that sets different standards for men and women. It is Maya’s journey in search of happiness and her struggle for identity in a loveless marriage. The novel has a very simple plot. There are no subplots in the novel. It is a bitter-sweet love story set in the nineties.
The novel opens with Maya, a young and attractive textile designer from Calcutta (Kolkata) getting engaged to Ranjan Mallik from her dream city Bombay (Mumbai). Maya is bored with her dull, middle-class home in Calcutta. On her visit to Bombay with her mother, they meet Ranjan Mallik and his mother. Maya, who visits Bombay for mere ‘sight-seeing’, immediately falls in love with the city and thinks marrying Ranjan would fulfill her dreams of becoming a part of the city forever. After her engagement with Ranjan, Maya thinks, “she was the luckiest girl in the locality who had bagged a foreign educated Bombay based groom.”¹⁵ (Second Thoughts 69) but soon realizes that Ranjan and she were like two strangers locked together in matrimony.

The plot of the novel explores the hardships and miseries in Maya’s newly married life. Shobha De presents two conflicts in the novel and strikes a perfect balance between them. We, at once come across the internal conflict in Maya’s mind and the external conflict between Ranjan and Nikhil. There is also the conflict between the social values of patriarchal society and the liberal modern thought. De has used first person narration throughout the novel except in case of the prologue which uses a third person narrative technique. The novel is full of flashbacks through which we try to find answers to the present day questions.

The writer has dealt with the problems of married women who are ignored by their husbands. It is the natural desire of every married woman to enjoy love and attention from her husband. She expects to find a soul mate in the man with whom she has pledged to spend her entire life. She longs to spend some quality time with him, share their interests with each other, admire each other’s talent and skills, go out together and make the edifice of marriage strong. Unfortunately in a traditional marriage, the husband assumes a commanding position and often by his highhanded behavior humiliates his wife. Women are discriminated, subjugated, exploited and victimized by the men. Under such circumstances, women are reduced to a mere object, almost a toy to be enjoyed by men. De’s Maya also is
stripped of her individuality and identity post marriage. There are several incidents in the novel that clearly depict Maya’s pitiable condition. She is alienated from the society, friends and family. She is confined to the four walls and she realizes that the only space which she can claim to be as her own is the kitchen. Her husband makes fun of her when she expresses her wish to study further and he comes up with excuses to discourage her from seeking employment. Maya is a bird who wants to soar high up in the sky, but her wings are nipped off by tradition and culture. Shobha De has given a very profound treatment to this theme in Second Thoughts.

3.8 Female Characters in ‘Second Thoughts’

In contrast to other novels of Shobha De, Second Thoughts employs very few characters. The central figure is Maya and ninety percent space is within the novel istaken away by her presence in it. There is no subplot in the novel. It is only around the protagonist Maya that all the action takes place. It is through Maya that we meet all other characters, who are related to her in some way or the other. The novel gives us interesting glimpses of the psyche of Indian woman and exposes the reality of arranged marriages where two people are forced to live together because of social pressure. The conflict is rightly captured in the novel. Here, the character of Maya reminds us of Candida in G. B. Shaw’s play by the same name. There is also a great similarity between De’s Maya and Padmini, the protagonist of Girish Karnad’s ‘Hayavadana’.

There are about six women characters in the novel. Maya, Chitra, and Mrs. Mallik are the principal characters besides a few minor characters like Pushpa, Mrs. Mehta, etc. De’s Maya serves as a prototype for the reader’s insight into the psyche of modern Indian women. Thus a detailed study of the character of Maya is imperative.
3.8.1 Maya

Shobha De’s Maya is an educated, beautiful and accomplished woman from Calcutta whose wish is to make the city of her dreams-Bombay, her home forever. The action of the novel revolves around the high-spirited, bouncy and energetic Maya, the protagonist of the novel, who visits Bombay to meet her would be in laws. Her dream of settling in Bombay would only be realized with the prospect of a marriage with Ranjan Mallik.

*Marrying Ranjan would make her a part of it immediately - Maya knew she’d be bonded with Bombay forever. (12)*

And thus begins Maya’s inexorable romance with Bombay in the company of her least romantic husband Ranjan. However, very soon Maya is extremely disappointed by the life in this city which smells of “*desperation and deceit*” (1)

**Maya’s Early Life**

Maya hails from an educated middle-class Bengali family in Calcutta. She lives with her parents in their ancestral home which they share with her relatives. She has a degree in textile designing. Maya’s mother has raised her with good values and manners. But, Maya is not fortunate enough to spend a healthy and pleasant childhood owing to her parents’ irreconcilable differences. She shares a strange relationship with her mother, devoid of warm sentiments. It seemed as if her mother bonded with her out of a sheer sense of duty. As for her father, he was affectionate with her though in a detached way. She neither has any close friends nor a boyfriend. She is twenty three years old when she gets married to Ranjan. Her father never participates actively in any of the family matters. Even the decision of her marriage with Ranjan with whom she falls in love at first sight is entirely taken by her mother and her maternal uncle, Prodipmama.
Unpleasant memories of anxiety-ridden childhood, wanting in love, have its effects on Maya’s psyche in her growing-up years, palpable symptoms of which are seen in the form of depression, low self-esteem, withdrawal and suicidal tendencies in her mature years.

**Maya’s Initial Days after Marriage and her Disillusionment**

Maya, a trained textile designer from Calcutta marries Ranjan who lives in Bombay. He is wealthy and holds a degree from a university in America. Her married life with Ranjan starts on a depressing note during their honeymoon in a hotel at Mahabaleshwar. Maya’s love and passion for her husband Ranjan, during their honeymoon fails to excite him as he turns out to be a miserably passive partner. Maya is pained to know that his decision to marry and settle down was solely to satisfy his mother’s wish for a bride in the house.

When Maya learns that Ranjan did not find it comfortable to get into a relationship with any woman, and that he prefers the company of men and avoids women because of “his failures with six girls he had tried to make love to” (52), she feels frustrated and disappointed by his superciliousness and conventional mental make-up.

Every time Maya tries to broach the subject, he snubs her:

> **What’s your problem? You are beginning to sound like some sort of a nymphomaniac. Are you that sex-starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex be so important to anybody, I’ve never understood.** (257)

Maya is deeply hurt by his searing words and her heart filled up with deep desperation. She began to feel ashamed and cheap for nurturing thoughts about sex. Maya does not live a sexually satisfying life with Ranjan. She is aghast by his orthodox behavior when he discusses his wife’s menstruation cycle with the priest. To her surprise, Ranjan tells her that he believes in the old tradition and a glimpse
of it is visible when he tells her that no menstruating woman should be involved in auspicious functions.

Maya is even more agonized by Ranjan’s insensitivities. She feels alienated in her own house as Ranjan out rightly ignores her. He is all the time “remote and disconnected”(8). Maya’s wings of freedom are nipped off by a host of instructions imposed upon her.

He restrains her from taking up a job and argues that-

\[
I’m \text{ earning well enough to support a wife and a family. I believe it is a woman’s duty to run a good home (10-11)}
\]

Maya’s free spirit begins to wilt under Ranjan’s conservative ideas of patriarchy. Her innocent dreams and desires are mercilessly trampled down by none other than her husband. Her innocent heart craves for a word of encouragement and looks forward to some appreciation. But all that Maya receives is criticism. She feels asphyxiated by Ranjan’s unfriendly attitude and hostile remarks. Even her smallest of wish is dismissed off without any fore-thought. She finds her confidence crumbling into pieces and begins to wonder if all husbands behaved so.

At Maya’s request to be taken on a tour of Bombay, he very cheekily replies,

\[
\text{Sometimes you talk like such a kid. Life is not a picnic. And you aren’t in Bombay on a holiday. As a married woman, you have to learn to deal with responsibilities (27). And then goes on to add, “If you want to go anywhere, ask my mother to accompany you” (27).}
\]

Maya feels suffocated by Ranjan’s mother-fixation. His obsession with his mother pushes him to draw parallels between herself and his mother:

\[
\text{Mummy is a very good house keeper and home maker. She is amazing. Maybe you should train with her instead of doodling away your time at a drawing board (66).}
\]
Maya feels irritated for being told to follow his mother’s footsteps always. The son continues to live in the shadow of his mother and has no respect or consideration for his wife whatsoever. Maya ceases to exist for her husband and the family.

**Maya’s Loneliness**

Maya’s marriage with Ranjan turns out to be a complete disaster. Ranjan is a bank executive and a workaholic. As a husband, he provides Maya “nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and four square meals a day” (263). Even his leisure hours are spent absorbed in reading the newspapers. Being chained within the four walls of her house Maya is not allowed to meet people, make friends or even look out of the window. From the very first days of her marriage she is forced to follow the dictates of her husband. Ranjan doesn’t consider her intelligent enough to be able to take part in discussions on his professional or even personal matters. He also feels “a little ashamed of” (115) Maya as she does not belong to Bombay and is different from the local girls. Mayas’s suggestion to take up a job to keep her meaningfully occupied is promptly rejected by his harsh words:

> Mumbai is like New York. Or London. Tough, competitive. You have to be good, great, brilliant, to get a job here. People don’t waste time on nobodies (28).

Maya is taken aback by his rebuke. She swallows his insulting remarks because of her innate humility. Ranjan has no respect for her absolutely. In spite of being equally educated, he fails to appreciate her worth as a wife and more so as an individual. He is also cynical of her parents and her family. The unbridled male ego in him is not satisfied yet. Ranjan goes on to add scornfully:
In our families, the only sort of work ladies do is social work. Our relatives might criticize us if you suddenly take up a job. It's not done. They might think I don’t earn enough or I’m forcing you to contribute towards household expenses (122).

Ranjan’s caustic words quash Maya’s zeal for life. She has no identity in the family and ends up being a showpiece. Ranjan’s mother constantly insinuates Maya about her inferior family status and is grossly inconsiderate of her abilities. She is disappointed by the self-centered attitude of both the mother and son. Jilted and humiliated, Maya thus, begins to experience utter loneliness in her own home. Maya’s excitement of starting her new life with Ranjan in the city of her dreams is short-lived, for, within a year of her marriage, she starts feeling totally lost, dejected, and useless.

Maya’s lonely heart cried out:

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belong to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own (372-73).

Thus, Maya’s marriage to Ranjan is a debacle. Instead of coming together to nurture love, concern and companionship between them, their marriage, on account of Ranjan’s callous attitude and his constant neglect and disapproval drives Maya to depression and loneliness. Maya is pushed to the periphery and consequently loses her sense of belongingness. She is surrounded by a strange feeling of emptiness:

The house. That was how I always referred to this place, even to myself. It was never home. My home. Our home. Always- ‘the house’-impersonal, distant, cold. Home continued to be Calcutta. My parental home (227).
After marriage, it is the tradition for daughters to leave their parents’ ‘house’ which she rightfully refers to her ‘home’. This is until she makes fresh beginnings in life in her husband’s ‘house’ which she very lovingly desires to turn into her permanent ‘home’. While a house is built from brick and cement, a home is nurtured with love and care. Home is much more than a physical construct; it is where and when you feel most comfortable being yourself. Unfortunately for Maya, her house never transforms into a home.

Feminists like Katha Pollitt, Virginia Woolf and others have raised questions on women’s futile existence in a patriarchal framework and the subservient role imposed on her by society. Their oft repeated question to the male chauvinists has been whether it is on account the biological peculiarities in their personality that women are treated as secondary? Why is it that a woman doesn’t have a room of her own? Is it because of the unjust, inconsiderate and unsympathetic practices of patriarchy that pushes her to the dark alleys of miseries and sufferings?

One of the most important units in society is the family. Feminists refer to this unit as the patriarchal family. They argue that family is at the centre of male-oppression. According to them it is a seedbed for female subjugation. While Shulamith Firestone believes, “The family is...cause of the ills of the larger society”\(^{16}\) (254), Marilyn French denounces family as the seat where men exercise their power over women.

\begin{quote}
The family is the primary site of female subjugation, which is achieved largely through sexuality: Women are indoctrinated into their supposed “natural state” by male control of their sexuality in the family\(^{17}\) (French 53).
\end{quote}

She further argues that it is not just family but also the institution of marriage which breeds male aggression. Feminists, world over consider this institution
inherently inequitable. Comparing marriage with the cruel custom of slavery in her essay titled Marriage, Sheila Cronan points out that:

*The institution of marriage “protects” women in the same way that the institution of slavery was said to “protect” blacks... the word “protection” in this case is simply a euphemism for oppression*18 (214).

Shobha De, remains in close alliance with these feminists on her views about marriage. She makes certain interesting observations:

*Marriage, most people will agree is unnatural. Two strangers with nothing in common agree to spend their lives together. Absurd. Illogical. Dangerous.19* (Spouse xv).

She is of the opinion that, *“Marriage is for those who believe in it, who actively want it, who enjoy it”*20 (Spouse xii).

In her revelation about the contemporary truth regarding the institution of marriage, she firmly maintains:

*Do not marry because you want children but not necessarily marriage. Do not marry for the sake of some imaginary “security,” for none exists. Marry because you want to marry. Because you believe in it. Because you wish to share your life with someone you care about. Only then will that marriage survive and thrive*21 (Spouse xv).

Taking a cue from the aforesaid observations, it can be argued that Ranjan gets into wedlock with the sole intention of pleasing his mother. According to him his contribution to the marriage was over with selecting Maya as his wife, which also explains the fact that he refused to perform any other marital duties towards his wife in order to add happiness and love to their man and wife relationship. Ranjan is insensitive to Maya’s feelings, desires, pleasures and pain. He neither loves her as his wife nor respects her as an individual. She is unwelcome in their bedroom
which Ranjan considers as ‘his’ domain. Utterly dejected she seeks refuge in the kitchen and ironically it is perhaps only this place that belongs to her exclusively.

The feminist’s disapproval and condemnation of the institution of marriage in a patriarchal society as a site for perpetrating power-play and male-domination is aptly justified with respect to the marriage between Maya and Ranjan. This is evident from her mother-in-law’s strict preferences exercised while choosing a girl for Ranjan.

Maya’s mother-in-law opines:

If you ask me, it’s always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background. Grief comes to a man who marries above his station. The husband loses all control over her and she ends up having the upper hand. Such a marriage can never work which is why we are so careful while selecting the right candidate for Ranjan. I think we have made the right choice in Maya. (231-32)

This clearly explains that firstly in a marriage, it has been the male’s prerogative to ‘choose’ his wife; secondly marriage is a game of power where the man must have complete control over the woman. In other words, the husband is the powerful predator and the wife is the prey. He is the ‘oppressor’ and she the ‘oppressed’. He is the ‘master’ and she the ‘slave’ within the protective boundaries of marriage. Maya’s plight is also like a slave, who suffers ‘oppression’ at the hands of her husband in the name of ‘protection’.

Maya’s Second Thoughts

Maya, the ravishing and captivating middle-class girl from Calcutta marries the ‘foreign educated’ Ranjan and migrates to the city of her dreams-Bombay. Their marriage however, is devoid of love and sexual attraction. Ranjan looks at the passionate Maya in “an almost brotherly gesture” (49) and feels repulsed by her
nearness. Like every married woman, Maya experiences a longing to love and be loved. But Ranjan is averse to her needs and shrugs away from all the responsibilities of a husband. Feeling terribly ignored and neglected, Maya goes into depression. Gradually this depression lands her in some kind of crippling loneliness.

Maya who had once dreamed to be “free, alive, reckless and mad” (75) ends up in solitariness. Her miseries are further aggravated by total lack of communication with her relatives. The young Nikhil’s entry into her life lifts up her spirits and fills up her loneliness with mirth and joy. A casual meeting with this young college-going teenager who is the son of Dipankar, Ranjan’s colleague in the bank soon develops into friendship. Although she is aware of his flippant nature, she allows him to invade her solitariness. The tense and self-conscious Maya is wooed by a boy five years younger. She feels delighted in his presence, enjoys his songs, and feels nice in his company while exploring the streets of the city of her dreams. Nikhil is aware of the loneliness and boredom that shrouds Maya. He understands her need of a companion and very smartly wins over her.

Maya, on her part, feels loved, desired and pampered by a man for the first time. Though she loves their togetherness and the thought of Nikhil each time fills her with rapture, she is perpetually guilt-ridden and frightened by her clandestine affair. In addition to this she feels weighed down by the burden of trying to violate values and morals in life. In a moment of passion, she shares the pain in her heart:

*The truth is I’m confused and ashamed of myself. I know it’s wrong, very wrong for a married woman to go out with a man especially when her husband doesn’t know it...As you do know by now, I’m not that type of person. I’m not a flirt. I’ve never been cheap. May be God will punish me for this. But in my heart of hearts, I know I didn’t do anything wrong. Is it a*
sin to go out and breathe the air? I don’t have an answer. If God is to punish me for what I’ve done, he will (195).

Nikhil flatters Maya by his sweet loving words that ring secret notes in her heart. Carried away by the passionate intensity of his words she resolves to set right everything that has been wrong in her life—be it friendship, marriage and life itself. At that moment she felt that everything seemed wrong with her life—her marriage, her decision of moving to Bombay, her submissive acceptance of the miseries in life. Thus, on second thoughts, she allows herself to take her affair with Nikhil to a more intimate level. She takes a bold step and gets into sexual relationship with Nikhil. In her moments of ecstasy, she comes to recognize her individuality and is able to identify the woman in her which had lain dormant until now.

De’s Maya meets two interestingly different men in her life. While one is her husband Ranjan, the other is the young Nikhil, with whom she develops an illicit friendship. Maya feels alienated by Ranjan’s indifference, impassivity and nonchalance. But, it is Nikhil’s clement, caring and compassionate attitude that enraptures Maya. If Ranjan is oblivious of Maya’s beauty and talent and feels repulsive in her presence; Nikhil is inspired by her to write a song. Ranjan in the novel represents the abominable image of patriarchy whereas; Nikhil stands for the blissful world of love that every woman dreams of. Ranjan spells bondage and captivity while Nikhil breathes freedom.

Maya, the well-bred girl who comes to Bombay with rosy dreams of ushering into a happy, loving and meaningful relationship with her husband, finds her life turning into a world of silent, solitary suffering. Until she meets Nikhil she lives a life of low self-esteem. His presence in her life makes her aware of her beauty and she feels excited. Nikhil’s indulgent ways rejuvenates her otherwise dull life of drudgery and encourages her to be bold and daring to live life uninhibited. Lack of love in her marriage—both emotional and physical, draws her away from her
husband, and she longs for Nikhil’s company. In spite of her firm conviction to keep her friendship with Nikhil within limits, Maya, in sheer desperation and loneliness gets carried away and enjoys passionate moments with him. Though she is utterly confused, Nikhil makes her feel “Free. Lunatic. Wonderful” (268).

**Maya’s Dilemma and Frustration**

Maya’s life is torn between her obligation as a conscientious and loyal wife on one hand and her desire to be loved on the other. Her acceptance of boredom and monotony in her one year old marriage as a result of a sexually passive husband and his unmindful and dispassionate treatment of his wife comes into conflict with the carefree and lively hours of togetherness offered by Nikhil. In spite of feeling utterly desolate, imbued by tradition, she mutely resigns to perform the role of a good wife and turns into “a fulltime, domestic servant without pay” (154). Deprived of her emotional and sexual needs, Maya has to continue to be a dutiful wife “cooking, cleaning or pleasing someone” (189). Maya is thus a prototype for scores of traditional Indian women who are embodiments of suffering and sacrifice. While the docile ‘wife’ in Maya compels her to abnegation, the free spirited ‘woman’ in her gradually propels her to yield to moments of temptation and boundless joy. But Maya is perpetually pained by her guilt of betraying her husband by giving in to a behavior which is condemnable in the eyes of society. This becomes clear from her letter written to Nikhil:

> I was helpless and wanted to go out with you desperately. Please don’t misunderstand me or misjudge me. I am not a flirt. I’ve never been cheap. May be God will punish me for this (195).

It may be observed here that the patriarchal conceptual framework is oppressive in nature and maintains the subordination of women by men. Feminists have strongly challenged and frowned upon this cultural hegemony of patriarchy. Being assigned well-defined roles in society, it becomes hard and often impossible for
women to transgress its predetermined codes. And when they do so, they are ostracized. She is expected to suppress all her desires and suffer the atrocities and humiliation. As long as she is able to silently and unquestioningly tolerate and act on the dictates of her man, she is considered good and ‘virtuous.’ The moment she decides to break away from the imposed order, she is called names. She is then willful, arrogant and profane. Thus, Maya is forced to sacrifice her desires and stops dreaming in the company of her boring and indifferent husband who is never sexually aroused. He disregards Maya’s passionate moods and criticizes her as “nymphomaniac, a cheap woman. A Prostitute” (259). Suppressing the frustrations of her married life, Maya expresses her helplessness to Nikhil, “Whether it is in Calcutta or Bombay, a married woman is not supposed to meet other men. That’s all” (169).

Shobha De has a distinctive ability to delve into the psyche of her women characters and explore the interplay of emotions in their hearts. De’s Second Thoughts is a perfect delineation of Maya’s search for identity in a male-chauvinistic world. Maya lives through the ordeal of a loveless marriage with irresistible yearnings lodged in her young heart that finally impels her into adultery. On one hand, she is seen to bear the pangs of a frustrated wife and on the other, she is found battling against the dilemma of being loyal to her husband or embracing an adulterous relationship. She writes about her confusion and depression to Nikhil:

*My husband, even though he studied in America and all that, is not like this. He is old fashioned and conservative...... I also feel he is a bit too serious and hardworking.....Nikhil, I wish you were here with me just now. I like your voice, I like the way you talk, I like your teasing me. I even like it when you get angry with me. But best of all, I like your laughter* (203).
Maya craves for little pleasures. She is a simple and innocent girl who could be made happy by small words of appreciation, love and attention which she originally desired from her husband Ranjan. De’s Maya is reminiscent of the heroine of Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, the Peacock*. An educated woman, Maya’s ambition, dreams and desires are all crushed under the impact of male-domination and conservatism of Ranjan.

**Maya’s Intelligence and Confidence**

Maya is not only intelligent but a loving and affectionate girl. Her intelligence is praised and acknowledged by her family and her neighbors. Her first experience on her arrival in Bombay is horrifying. She sights a corpse lying orphaned in Victoria Terminus and stares at it in disbelief. She is moved by the apathy of the people of the metropolis and she forms her first impression of the city of Bombay being bereft of emotions. She notices a sea change in the psyche of Bombay and Calcutta. When they reach Mr Mallik’s home, Prodipmama tells Mrs. Mallik:

*Our Maya is very talented. Always getting high marks in school and college. She always uses her training to do something from home itself. Design and sell sarees, for example, after all, modern girls also need to express themselves...*(13)

Nikhil too finds her intelligent and friendly. She has a modern outlook. She likes Nikhil calling her Maya instead of Aunty or Didi.

Her interaction with Ranjan’s American boss also displays her confidence, intelligence and presence of mind. She has good communication skills and conducts herself smartly in presence of the American. She shakes hands with him and communicates with him confidently. Though it is her first conversation with a foreigner, she doesn’t feel intimidated.
Maya’s mother who represents a traditional woman doesn’t give much importance to her daughter’s academic skills and intellectual abilities. Rather she advises her to prove herself as a good home-maker and a dutiful wife. In spite of the fact that Maya is educated and talented; her husband criticizes her and underestimates her knowledge. A qualified textile designer, Maya dreams of becoming a journalist and change the world. But Ranjan fails to recognize her intellectual worth and passes remarks that humiliate her. He considers her ignorant and refuses to involve her in any sort professional or personal discussions.

**Nikhil’s Engagement and Maya’s Self-Realization**

Maya and Nikhil live in the same building. He is younger than Maya. Soon after they meet, a bond of friendship grows between them. Maya enjoys Nikhil’s company. He visits Maya frequently. Nikhil is a teenager who has no values or manners. Yet he is able to win over Maya because of a deep void in Maya’s life. She is lonely and desperate for companionship and a sense of belonging. Nikhil woos Maya with his flattery. The newly-married Maya starts day-dreaming about a neighbor’s young son who is “good looking, confident, sporty, cocky, flirtatious, lazy, spoilt and quite irresistible” (32). Nikhil is smart enough to understand Maya’s loneliness and indulges her by treating her to the “world’s best bhelpuri” (90) and even composes a song on her. In Nikhil’s presence Maya behaves like a carefree girl:

> I didn’t care who saw him there or what the consequence would be for me later. I didn’t care if at that moment Ranjan had walked into the house {or} my mother-in-law herself chose to arrive right then. I would deal with it (168).

Maya develops a fondness for Nikhil and is thrilled to know that she is loved by someone. Gradually their friendship turns intimate and on Nikhil’s birthday, she takes a bold step to get physically involved with him. This is the first instance
when Maya recognizes the woman in her. But this feeling of exhilaration is unfortunately short-lived. Maya soon learns about Nikhil’s engagement with a girl of his own age. She is shocked to hear the news. Maya’s dreams are shattered by a man once again. She is lost in thoughts and is startled by Ranjan’s words, “Honestly, Maya, I sometimes wonder about you. You never pay attention. Where is your mind?” (278) Maya realizes the futility of her relationship with Nikhil and resolves to rebuild her relation with Ranjan again.

Maya’s resoluteness is effortlessly expressed in the concluding lines of the novel:

The more I stared at the spilled soup, the funnier I found it. I knew I would have to make it again from scratch. So what? I had all the time in the world now (289).

3.9 Male Characters in ‘Second Thoughts’

Second Thoughts is a realistic portrayal of the life of a middle-class woman. It is a first person narration of a newly married woman. The novelist explores the life of a newly married girl whose heart is full of youthful dreams and desires that turns into a dark alley with no hopes of an exit. De has introduced a few male characters in the novel and they are seen from the eyes of a woman. She tells us what they do, what they speak and what they are like. The novelist has used a new perspective and presented the narrative from a female point of view. The two important male characters in the novel are Ranjan and Nikhil. There are some other less important characters like: Maya’s father, Mr. Mallik, Prodipmama - Maya’s maternal uncle, Ranjan’s American Boss, Tom Becher, etc.

Ranjan is the hero of the novel. He represents the traditional Indian male. He holds a degree from an American University and works as an executive in a bank. Ranjan confesses that he consented to marry only to satisfy his mother. Ranjan shows signs of being a gay although this is only implied in the novel. He prefers to
stick “with men” (52) and avoids women including his wife Maya because of his failure to make love to them. Ranjan is charming, competent and a workaholic. The twenty eight year old “virgin” (48) looks at his wife as a brother would because he is completely ignorant and a novice in matters concerning a woman. Ranjan is portrayed as the dominant patriarchal voice in the novel. This becomes clear from his typical mindset and attitude towards women. Firstly, he does not want to marry a Bombay girl because they are smart, liberated, and perhaps demand equal rights. Ranjan believes in exercising his male superiority and hence prefers to marry a traditional, simple and unspoiled girl. He is a chauvinist. He doesn’t appreciate his wife’s achievements and feels threatened by her desire to take up a job. He looks at her condescendingly and lectures her about her role that:

\[
A \text{ housewife’s duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top. That is where her true happiness lies (27)}
\]

Ranjan is obsessed with money and remains conspicuously insensitive to all human emotions, feelings and desires. Extremely mother-fixated, he is continuously seen comparing his wife Maya with his mother. He denies every small liberty or right to his wife and expects her to follow his diktat.

He threatens her with fears and keeps her socially banned. He does not like Maya talking to anyone. He tells her,

\[
\text{Women like –gullible outsiders-are so easily tricked. Today he is chatting, tomorrow he will rob and rape (41)}
\]

His expectations from his wife are very clear:

\[
\text{Wives should realize that when a man comes home dead tired; he needs a little peace in the house. Not poor joke (55).}
\]
Ranjan is self-centered, boorish and least courteous. He is averse to the needs of his wife and completely unaware about the nuances of a healthy marital relationship. His marriage lacks communication and he loses love and respect in the eyes of his wife.

Nikhil is very different from Ranjan. He is a carefree young boy of twenty years. He lives in the same building as Ranjan and is the son of Dipankar, his colleague. He writes poetry and loves music. He composes a song for Maya and calls it “lonely, lonely lady” (78). Nikhil enjoys life without any fear or tension. He is an incorrigible flirt and had an affair at the age of sixteen with Nalini Mehta who was his neighbor. He knows the art of wooing his women only too well. Without wasting time he makes a place in the heart of a lonely housewife. He appreciates Maya’s beauty, her dresses, her cooking, etc. Maya’s first impression of Nikhil is that of a spoilt son who squanders his father’s money. He is lacking in manners and doesn’t respect elders. In his very first meeting, he refuses to address Maya as aunty. He is also into vices like smoking and drinking. He seems over-confident and too sure about himself. He has been indisciplined as a young boy. We come to know from a salesman that, “what beatings he got form his father when he was fifteen-sixteen” (57).

This increases Maya’s curiosity about him. Maya thinks, “He was too smart for me. And far too sure himself” (57). She gets carried away in his company as Nikhil knows the knack of dealing with lonely wives. He expresses his feelings easily and is extremely generous with his compliments. He tells Maya “You look like a beautiful garden today” (63) and praising her style of dress goes on to add, “Hmmm, blue. Blue for a lady with the blues...You are wearing a mood saree” (87).

Initially, Maya feels good in his company but later she falls in love with him. During their outing together, she enjoys the bindaas life with him. She confesses,
“I like having Nikhil around. I felt good with him. That was it” (261). Nikhil later becomes very intimate with Maya and gives her the ultimate pleasure of being a woman that her husband deprived her of. Soon after this, Nikhil is engaged to Anshu, a Delhi-based girl leaving Maya feeling disappointed.

Nikhil is portrayed as being very considerate and cooperative with women. He doesn’t ascribe to ‘gender biases’. Hence, he does not consider it inferior to join Maya in cleaning her pots and wash her clothes. He gives equal rights to women and he never considers them inferior. We find in Nikhil a true companion.

Tom Becker Jr. is the American boss of Ranjan. Ranjan keeps mentioning his name at home and Maya suggests her husband to invite him for dinner. Ranjan too likes the idea. When he visits them, Maya offers him good hospitality. He is very cooperative and polite. He greets Maya with a handshake. He praises Maya for her good housekeeping and her artistic nature. He thanks her for the exquisite dinner and Maya likes his approach. We find Ranjan over protective. Ranjan does not like Tom entering the kitchen and he is not ready to give Maya any credit.

Prodipmama is Maya’s maternal uncle. We are introduced to him in the beginning of the novel. He is a wise man who has learned a lot from experience. He is very polite and submissive when he goes to meet the Malliks. He is instrumental in arranging Maya’s marriage with Ranjan. Though he lives in the same city as Maya, he chooses to keep himself away from her with the positive intention of helping her settle down in her life without any interference. Prodipmama explains to Maya that husbands don’t like to express their feelings because they are shy and that they do not consider it important to be explicit about their thoughts.

Maya’s father and Mr. Mallik are not very significant characters in the novel. Maya does not remember her father being a popular member in her family. He never interfered in any of the family decisions. He always stayed in his room and Maya was surprised why her parents did not share a bed. With Maya too, he was
affectionate in a detached way. He was only close to his friends but Maya’s mother Chitra did not like his friends and so did not approve of them visiting their house. It is more or less a similar case with Ranjan’s father. Ranjan does not have any fond memories of his father. Whenever Maya inquires about his father, he either avoids the question or refrains from sharing any information.

It is interesting to note that the male characters in the novel can be studied from two perspectives. Ranjan versus Nikhil. While Ranjan is settled with a degree from a foreign university, Nikhil doesn’t do well in academics and is worried about his future. Ranjan has problems mingling with or having relationships with women, Nikhil very easily is able to strike friendship with girls. Ranjan’s mother loves and praises him a lot whereas Nikhil’s mother is worried and tensed about the future of her son. The reader is presented with interesting glimpses of the male characters from the narrator’s point of view.

3.10 Portrayal of ‘Self’ of Female Protagonists in ‘Second Thoughts’

Second Thoughts deals with the flaring issue of identity of women. Identity takes into its fold everything that helps define oneself as “the real me.” It ascertains one’s individuality and expresses how a person thinks about himself particularly his inner self as opposed to what is perceived by people around him. Our society is a heterogeneous mix of people and personalities. It is based upon certain principles which differentiate a man from another. In other words, identity is a joint construct of an individual’s personality juxtaposed against the social order he belongs to. Identity thus is a psycho-social attribute. It is mostly shaped by constituents like social, cultural and political factors, conflicts, dilemmas, educational, and sexual matters. Identity is valued and desired by all.

Shobha De’s novel Second Thoughts focuses on the identity crisis of its chief protagonist Maya. Her identity is marked with negative connotations as a girl from Calcutta. We meet Chitra, Prodipda and Maya in the first chapter of the novel.
They have come to Bombay to meet the Mallik family as they want to offer Maya’s proposal as a bride for Ranjan Mallik. Both the mother and the uncle want to give Maya her deserving identity. A girl’s identity is generally based on her relation with her father, husband or son. In case of Maya too, her family believes that her alliance with the well educated foreign-returned Ranjan who has a good family background and a decent and respectable job will lead to a happy and harmonious relationship. Unfortunately, Mayas’s marriage turns out to be disaster. Maya doesn’t seem to have an ‘existence’ in the Mallik family be it as a wife or as a daughter-in-law. Traditional beliefs snatch away her identity as a daughter after her marriage. She is only Mrs. Mallik and that is her identity. Maya realizes that in the desire to acquire an identity, she has lost her ‘self” completely. She expects to be accepted and merged into their family which she can call as her own. Unfortunately, Ranjan guards all the borders and never allows her to be a part of his family. He denies her participation in the matters of the family. He denigrates her and forces her away from all action in the house. She is confined within the four walls of her house with her wings nipped off. Maya is made a slave, a captive in her own house. Thus, her freedom is curtailed and her identity is suppressed, and her ‘self” is thwarted from blossoming as a woman and an individual.

She tries hard to lead a normal, healthy relationship with Ranjan as his wife. However, she is never able to make a ‘room’ for herself which she can call her own. Ranjan’s rude and heartless comments humiliate her. She feels alienated and victimized in her own house. Women have for ages remained the butt of criticism, fowl treatment and censure. If she decides to be a mute sufferer, she is considered virtuous; else she has to face expulsion. The calm and docile Maya contemplates over her state of neglect and evaluates her behavior to find out if there’s anything wrong with her for being assailed by her husband. She begins to feel claustrophobic in her own house owing to stark indifference and hostility from its
inmates. She longs to be loved and cared for and craves for a sense of belongingness. Nikhil’s friendship and closeness soothes her heartache. He then placates Maya with moments of physical intimacy. It is for the first time that the reluctant and confused Maya is able to satiate the ‘woman’ in her. However, this moment of awareness of her individuality is far too short-lived. The news of Nikhil’s engagement with Anshu shatters her dreams and she reconciles to domesticity and solitariness.

Maya’s search for ‘self’ is not realized yet. It may be argued here that Maya has to endure the pain and agony of exploitation at the hands of both Ranjan and Nikhil who represent the faces of patriarchy. Both act as impediments in her path of self-realization. Ranjan marries the simple and innocent Maya at the behest of his mother. Maya is victimized by Ranjan in the guise of marriage for she continues to remain emotionally, socially and sexually deprived. Nikhil takes advantage of her loneliness and satisfies his own carefree intentions on the pretext of making the neglected wife, Maya happy. Maya’s innocence is beguiled in the name of marriage (by Ranjan) and love (by Nikhil). The subdued and quiet Maya’s journey from innocence to experience renders her wise and strong. Although her “silent cry for true companionship for herself always remains unheard” (Dodiya 283), De’s self-assured Maya decides to move on in her quest undeterred with her decision to make new beginnings in her marriage.

3.11 Conclusion

Thus, both Socialite Evenings and Second Thoughts are vivid portrayals of Shobha De’s female protagonists’ search for identity against the strong societal forces of patriarchy. De, through her women characters shows her concern for their sufferings and marginalization in a male-dominated world. De’s women are modern, educated, intelligent and aware of their marginalized status. They openly express their discontent in the life of domesticity. De’s women desire equality
with men and show their resentment for unresponsive men. They don’t shy away from displaying any dissension against views or beliefs that perpetuate their suppression. Their indulgence in extra-marital affairs, their deviant sexual behaviors, their liberal attitude towards sex and morals and their uninhibited language are all ways to protest against the patriarchal pressures prevalent in society. De’s women do not believe in the traditional image of women and their role in marriage, family and interpersonal relationships. They also detest dependency over the males in financial matters. They have radical views about marriage and family. Unlike the traditional women, they don’t subscribe to these two institutions as the source of ultimate happiness. They believe in freedom from bondage cast upon them by tradition. De’s women are the New Age Women - determined, unrestrained confident and assertive. Instead of seeking sympathy or crying over their forsaken state, De’s protagonists assert their existence. In De’s Socialite Evenings, Karuna’s miserable plight in marriage does not strip her off her hopes of happiness. Shrugging of numerous offers of marriage after her divorce, she commits herself to a life of independence that can be lived on her own terms. Maya, in Second Thoughts is aware of her emotional and physical needs and aspires for a plausible space in the family.

De’s novels project her women’s frantic and frenzied struggle for existence through their unconventional behavior, their sexual escapades and their desire to be free from the clutches of male superiority. They are visibly averse to the male attitude that decides and dictates their existence. They detest the idea of being treated in a fashion that pampers the male ego. In this context De’s women characters seem to raise, “a gendered, existentialist fight against invisibility and inability, challenging authority, stereotypes, icons and sexist values” (James 104). This, then underlines the purpose of De’s fiction as an expression of women’s eternal struggle in search for ‘self’ that seeks to reveal many
imperceptible patterns of behavior that brings frustration to women in their quest for identity.
Works Cited

2. Anushasan, Parva, Chapter 21, Verse 19
15. De, Shobha. Second Thoughts. Penguin, 1996. (All quotations are taken from this edition with page no. in parenthesis)


