Chapter IV

SUBJUGATED AND MARGINALIZED WOMAN

Women are an integral part of human civilization. No nation or society can ever progress without active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of woman in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, one fact common to almost all societies is that the woman has never been considered as equal to man. Her status depends largely on the simple biological fact that she is inferior to man and that is why she is usually restricted to her traditionally assigned roles. Since times immemorial, a woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression and is treated like a beast and an object for pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex and his sole property. Besides, many religions of the world have given sanction to the female’s subjugation to the male members of the society.

Increasing awareness of injustice done to women slowly made them raise their voices against inequality and oppression. This female consciousness against male domination slowly led to the rise of Women’s Liberation Movement in 1960 in Western Europe and United States. Since then it has become the most powerful social, cultural and political movement. It is a serious reform movement aiming at an upliftment of women in society.
But though it emerged in 1960s, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action because the first voice in favour of women’s rights was raised by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and also by the male contributors to this tradition such as John Stuart Mill in *The Subjugation of Woman* (1869) and Friedrich Engels in his *The Origin of the Family* (1884). Moreover, during 1970s some radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Eva Fige in *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) and Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) advocated their theories of equality between men and women.

De is one of the modern Indian women novelists. She probes into the abyss of the psyche of the modern woman and she cares and worries in her fiction for them. She explores the world of the modern urban woman as her novels are the slice of urban life. They deal with the contemporary issues related to subjugated and marginalized women. She realistically presents an intimate side of urban woman’s life in her novels and at the same time reveals her plight in the present day society. It is a fact that they fall as a victim everywhere to the prevalent social norms. She gets trapped within the set of moral codes and social norms of the society and consequently leads an unhappy life. The woman of urban life is no exception to it.
As a matter of fact, a woman is born to be as free as man, but she is victimized and subdued by the male community everywhere in patriarchal culture. She has been the subordinate sex, ‘the second sex’ and has to conform to men created, standards. The term ‘man’ usually reveals the entire human race, while ‘woman’ is silent and not mentioned. In the male-dominated society woman is still a second person and does not enjoy equal status with men. Even an educated woman cannot pursue her career without performing domestic duties. She has to pay attention to her career as well as home at the stake of her potentialities. This is one of the reasons why the conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by the women novelists.

De’s concern with the different aspects of woman’s life makes her portray a variety of women and it is this portrayal of women that brings out the different ways the women are subjected to male hegemony. In most of her novels, she has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. It is the fact that the majority of women in the last century were content with their lot of subordination in the home and society. But recently numerous women have expressed their discontent with their inferior status and strived for equality with men. They protested and agitated for equal fundamental
rights. This unrest became known as ‘the women question’ that Bernard Shaw deals in his *Candida* (1955: 93).

Being a woman, Shobha De through some of her women characters presents a very vivid picture of the inequality between men and women prevalent in the society even today. She draws our attention to women’s exploitation, discrimination and commodification. It is very apparent that women in this male dominated society are treated with double standards. Talking of women, Virginia Woolf (1992: 45-46) says:

> Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant … some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband.

At one end, women are opting for careers in space research and undertaking many important scientific and technical projects and at the other end they are the targets of sexual exploitation. Though this seems contradictory, there is nothing strange because in reality subjugation and marginalization are the prevailing vital factors in the lives of women. The calculation is simple: if patriarchal society is to survive, woman as a person cannot. Indian society has been and is even today a male-dominated society.
In the Indian social structure woman has been practically granted a subordinate position. Naturally she does not have independent status and is supposed to perform all the household duties but has limited rights. Her main job is to manage the house and rear the children. She is on duty for eighteen hours a day with no leisure of any sort. Though she performs honestly all household duties, she does not get financial freedom. Moreover, it is woman who is victimized and discriminated at each and every stage and is never regarded as an autonomous being. She has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position in all spheres of life. As Simone de Beauvoir (1987: 16) points out:

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees…. She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other.

It is in this context one can understand the marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands in Socialite Evenings. Karuna, the protagonist of the novel plays different roles at different times to fulfil her
emotional needs. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer. She finds a way to escape from her middle class environment by indulging into the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, a prominent socialite in Mumbai. She thinks that fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status that will fulfil her desires. Karuna represents a modern urban woman for whom her own career is prior to everything. She distinguishes herself by her own idea of emancipation and uncompromising attitude towards the legacy of orthodoxy and conservatism. But to adjust herself to the changing scenario and the modes of thought and way of living, Karuna, later on gets married to a young rich man. Soon, she realizes failure of her marriage. She thinks that she has married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Karuna has been locked up in a meaningless marriage. The relationship between Karuna and her husband is devoid of affection. It is vacuumed, strange and mechanical. The absence of feeling and concern for each other is revealed in her words:

We would lie there in the bedroom with the dull walls reading our respective magazines. He with The Economist and I with a film rag. If there was absolutely nothing better to do and we ran out of magazines, he would turn to me and nudge, ‘Wife-how
about it?’ Neither the words nor the tone did anything to allay the
disgust I usually felt. But it was simpler to just get on with the
damn thing and have it over and done with as fast as possible. I
would lie there staring at the ceiling as he pounded away. Or
sometimes I would mentally review the day’s accounts. I can
never remember my thoughts being anything other than
unedifying. (SE 59)

Lack of communication and emotional attachment between them made
her life boring. She starts feeling as a well-trained Indian wife. Besides this,
hers humiliation by her husband brings out the sad plight of women. He says:

You don’t deserve me and my family. My mother had told me at
the very beginning – “Find out more about this girl and her
family. Are they like us? Will they fit in? Will she?” and I had
given her a guarantee that you would be OK. How wrong I was
and how right she had been! (SE 178)

Thus as a wife Karuna serves the perfect example of miserable Indian
woman. She is frustrated due to her sterile marital life and marginalization.
Referring to the non-responsive attitude of husbands, Shobha De points out
that they are not evil men, but what they do to their wives is beyond evil.
Karuna hates the callous attitude of her husband and the unbearable condition. She 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 heads and four square meals a day. (SE 61)

Karuna’s pathetic utterance unfolds the plight of the marginalized Indian woman as her world is supposed to be restricted to ‘hearth and dearth’. Karuna is able to recognize how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate insulting remarks or comments of men and are denied the right to live as autonomous beings. She recalls the bitter experience of her friend, a qualified surgeon. She was deliberately humiliated by her husband. He is of the opinion that she married him for money. Here it is obvious that though her husband is not cruel, certainly he tries to impose his superiority and subjugates her which we can visualize from the following statement of Karuna’s friend:

He brainwashes me constantly. I am made to feel obliged and in debt. It is awful, but evens my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house, has become a
battleground. I don’t know what to do – either way I am stuck.  

(SE 61)

Though Karuna and the women like her looked at marriage as a solution to their problems and a way to fulfil their desires, in reality marriage shatters all their dreams and they suffer miserably in their wedded lives. According to Shobha De, the Indian male rarely fulfils the requisites of a proper husband. In this patriarchal social set up woman is reduced to a mere object. Karuna’s husband treats her as an object, subjected to his own will. As a result there is a complete loss of her identity. In an attempt and a quest to fulfil her emotional and psychological needs, Karuna develops an extra-marital relationship with Krish, an old friend of her husband. Karuna’s husband suspected this relationship which finally results in a divorce. But just before their separation, through the pretensive act of forgiveness, her so called husband tries to assert his male superiority. He sarcastically threatens Karuna:  

I have thought over the whole thing carefully. I would have thrown you right now – but I am prepared to give you one more chance. I am not a mean man. You have been a good wife. I don’t really have any major complaints against you. I am prepared to cancel this one black mark on your performance record and start with a clean slate. But you have to swear you

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will never see or keep in touch with that man again. I think I am being more than fair. No other husband would have reacted like this— but I said to myself, you are human, you have sinned, but I must be generous and forgive you. (SE 176)

Moreover, the condition of Karuna’s two sisters, Swati and Alak, is not better. Swati is an engineer, whose husband has taken an English mistress and divorced her. Like Karuna, they also pass through similar traumatic experiences. They are victims of patriarchal social system. Nisha, the other female character in the novel is no more than a whore. The novelist demonstrates the ways of sexual harassment of females by males through these and many more examples.

Anjali and Ritu are the minor women characters who are friends of Karuna. They are presented as flat and stereotyped characters responsible for their plight. The male-dominated social context is, to a great extent, responsible for this. The women like Anjali and Ritu cannot have their own identities as independent women, because they live in the society which is male-dominated. The only identities allowed to them are: mothers, housewives or bed mates. Ritu, for example, is reduced to a mere doll by the wolfish males who always looked at her as a ‘natural flirt’. According to Karan, she is like an ‘instant coffee’ or an ‘immediate pick-me-up’. The
following dialogue of Ritu clearly reveals her oppressed, exploited and subjugated predicament is caused by her husband and subjugation by her husband:

He came at me like a maniac. First he pulled out his leather belt from the trouser and then he stood over me with his eyes blazing. Phatak! – I felt the leather on my arm, and I was so stunned I couldn’t even scream. Before I could open my mouth, it landed on my arm again. I lost my balance – I was sitting on the edge of the carpet. He was still standing at the same spot with his arms raised. Suddenly I felt a sharp kick in my side, and another one. Then I heard him say “Shit! There goes my bally shoe”. Then he threw his belt away and started to slap me around. One hard hit cracked against my nose. My nose was like a geyser with blood gushing from it. (SE 121)

Frustrated Ritu gets divorce from her husband and is married to an underworld don – Gul. She is so much dependent on his mercy and promises to supply other women for his pleasure. As Ritu is financially dependent on Gul, he treats her malevolently. He humiliates her publicly. For instance, in one of the parties when Ritu picks a quarrel with starlet Sonia, it is Gul who beats Ritu in public. Anjali describes the incident to Karuna thus:
Gul got into a fight with Ritu and struck her straight on the face. He also called her some filthy names – in Hindi. And do you know something? Nobody dared interfere. She just lay there on the ground while he kicked her, yanked her hair, spat on her and tore her blouse. (SE 212)

Anjali, a young socialite woman in the novel, also suffers much due to her incompatible marriage and her husband’s oppressive attitude. While working as an Air hostess in Air India, Anjali marries Abe (Abbas Tyabji) but Abe’s unfaithfulness and an attitude of indifference destroys her familial happiness. In one of the meetings, Anjali tells Karuna that she cuts her nails because her husband does not like her long nails. Thus she has to conform to her husband’s wishes. Consequently, there is a complete loss of her identity, individuality and freedom. Later on, when she gets divorce from Abe, she goes from man to man to get hurt herself. Finally, she marries Kumar Bhandari to endanger herself as he is a homo-sexual and has relations with Murty and other young boys. She gets betrayed thus and turns to religion. The role of a traditional Hindu wife is thrust upon her. In short, the marital lives of Anjali, Ritu and Karuna illustrates that marriage subjugates and enslaves women. They fall prey to men because of their financial dependence. For instance, Anjali’s fascination for men is twofold: physical beauty and wealth.
Gul, the smuggler and underworld don, practically ‘buys’ Ritu. Here it seems that the dual interest of these women is, to some extent, responsible for their victimization and plights. These marginalized women do not have the characteristics of New Women such as self-confidence, independence of spirit, clarity of thought, moral courage and emotional soundness. They are victimized because they lack purity of head, heart and character. De is frank and straightforward in depicting the suffering of women in her novels.

*Socialite Evenings* is the portraiture of the tainted images of the subjugation, subordination and marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Shobha De does not attack individuals, but the system that favours men and causes women’s subjugation and marginalization.

*Starry Nights*, second novel of Shobha De created a storm in the literary world for its very frank portrayal of sex and exploitation. Thematically, it is about gender discrimination, subordination of women, male-violence and the social taboos. It is about glamorous and glittering world of cinema which attracts ambitious young girls who want name, fame and wealth. It portrays how these girls reach to their goals and become the victims of sexual exploitation. In fact, the novel offers the most dismal picture of women exploitation closely associated with the Bollywood and the world.
of modelling. Shobha De has authentically projected the shattering of human values in this glittering society through the realistic character-portrayal.

The novel can be divided into two parts and the first part deals with the ups and downs in the life of Aasha Rani, ‘the sweet-heart of the millions’ while the second part is about her unsuccessful married life. Subjugation and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is reflected in the portrayal of women characters such as Aasha Rani, Geetha Devi, Malini and Rita. In one way or the other they suffer at the hands of men. They are not only oppressed, exploited and humiliated in the film industry but also outside of it. A lot of suffering and trouble is caused to Geetha Devi, Aasha Rani’s mother as she is deserted by her husband. While rearing her daughters she has struggled and fought against poverty. The circumstance has forced her even to work as a prostitute and earn money to support the family and pay the fees for the dance lessons of Aasha Rani. Living in slums she has to pass through numerous hardships and face humiliation and exploitation. She is meek and subservient by temperament; as a result she is threatened, abused, neglected and finally deserted by her husband. Geetha Devi was also ill-treated by Girija whom her husband intended to marry. While looking at the album of her mother’s photographs, Aasha Rani recalls the past bitter experiences:
Piecing amma’s life together, Aasha Rani knew more or less what had happened. How appa had lost interest in her. How Girija had humiliated her and called her a common prostitute. How appa had abruptly cut off all money, leaving amma with no choice but to sell all her jewellery – and the clothes off her back. That was when his nightmare had begun. Moving out of their luxurious bungalow and into some ugly place in an overcrowded, filthy area. (SN 117)

The humiliation and suffering of Geetha Devi brings out the intensity of the suffering of all womenfolk. In spite of this, she remains faithful and a devoted wife and consequently appears as a typical traditional Indian woman suffering silently. Akshay’s wife Malini is portrayed in sharp contrast to Geetha Devi. Malini is portrayed as the modern woman who shouts and accuses Aasha Rani for the infidelity of her husband. She is ready to do anything and go to any extent in order to win back her husband.

The story of the life of Aasha Rani clearly indicates that in a patriarchal society a woman has to struggle for survival. As deprived of parental love and emotional security, Aasha Rani in her childhood itself had to face hardships such as starvation and poverty. Besides, she was sexually exploited by her own uncle due to the lack of fatherly protection. This incident brings out the
hypocrisy of the male-centered and male-dominated value system of our society. But Aasha Rani is the most unfortunate victim of her own merciless mother. Forgetting the mother’s role as a saviour, for the sake of money, Aasha Rani is pushed into the world of pornographic films and at the very young age thrown into the film industry. It is the mother who forces her daughter to please and impress the big personalities in Bollywood in order to bag good roles and thus plays the role of an exploiter of her own daughter. Naturally the members of the film world extract price from Aasha Rani to make her a top film star. Sudha Rani, her sister is also exploited by her mother in the same way. Apart from normal sex, Aasha Rani is also a victim to an abnormal sex as Sheth Amirchand orders a diaphragm to be inserted into her body, drugs her and also hits her with a thin rod. Even her journalist friend, Linda, exploits her through a lesbian relationship and also by disclosing many secrets of her life to others. Thus whether it is Kishenbhai, Sheth Amirchand, Jojo, Akshay, Abhijit, Linda or even her Appa, Amma and Sudha Rani, they all exploited Aasha Rani physically as well as mentally. Shobha De writes: “The industry was full of bhooka, sex-starved men who had chidiyas like Aasha Rani for breakfast.” (23)

Aasha Rani reaches at the top in her profession and falls in love with another top hero Akshay Arora who is a married man. She has to suffer a lot
due to this relationship. She is humiliated and insulted by Akshay’s wife Malini who curses her for trying to break her marriage. He is a typical representative of the patriarchal society. He keeps enjoying both the worlds-along with his wife Malini as a husband, and with Aasha Rani as her lover and bed-partner. Things become so bad when Aasha Rani goes un-invited to attend a mahurat of Akshay’s film, where she is humiliated and beaten by him for her un-invited and unwanted presence. Akshay Arora stared at Aasha Rani and shouted:

Why have you come here? Akshay lurched towards her, ‘Bitch! Don’t you know your place? I don’t like my women spying, you are a spy! Wanted to catch me with someone, didn’t you? Get out, get out!’ … Before she could finish her sentence, he had struck her hard across her face. Aasha Rani fell to the floor. Akshay kicked her … Aasha Rani could taste blood as it flowed from her nostrils. (SN 93)

Later, frustrated, betrayed and humiliated, she even tries to commit suicide. At this juncture, Abhijit Mehra enters in her life only to satisfy his lust. He is the son of Amrish Mehra, a powerful and wealthy industrialist. He is married to Nikita, a barrister from London. The following words of Aasha
Rani clearly show that he has no love for her. He intends just to use her and discard her:

You are a married man with a lovely young wife. And yet, you come to me. Why? For sex, nothing else! What does that make me? Not even Chandramukhi — she was a courtesan. I am just your celebrity fuck! (SN 167)

Thus Shobha De highlights the tragedy of Aasha Rani’s life from different angles. Nobody understands her; however, she is merely used by all.

Marriage for women is considered as the most important event. It is opined a solution to their problems. It is considered as the ultimate goal in life. Traditionally, marriage is everything for the young women in India. In life there is nothing to look forward and nothing to achieve other than marriage. Akshay’s wife Malini voices this traditional attitude towards marriage. She is an educated woman with a good cultural background. She is a woman of career and a *gazal* singer. Akshay Arora a top star of Bollywood chooses Malini as his wife not out of love but with a different purpose. In spite of knowing this, it is strange on the part of Malini to consent to marry Akshay who says:

I want a homemaker. Someone who will be a good mother to my children. I don’t want to marry a painted doll; some cheap film
girl who will flirt with all my friends. Malini is the right woman for me. (SN 67)

Malini is a typical Indian woman, submissive by nature who sacrifices her career in preference to her husband’s happiness. Akshay does not want Malini to share all his joys and sorrows. He wants her just as a housewife. Moreover, for Malini her husband is everything. Therefore, on the very day of her marriage Malini declares to give up her career. She says:

My husband means more to me than a career. I believe a wife’s place is in the home, not in a recording studio. Akshay is an old fashioned man. I will never displease him. (SN 67)

Thus in the character of Malini reflects the story of hundreds of such women who lead the life of slavery, misery and suffering the day they give up their career in preference to marriage. When a man marries he does not have to sacrifice his career but when a woman marries the first condition is giving up of her career. This act on the part of woman enslaves her for the rest of her life because of her financial dependence on her husband. There is no choice left other than to accept and comply with the whims of her husband. Malini cannot hide her frustration:

He was incapable of understanding her sensitive and artistic nature. He mocked her religion, he scoffed at her music, and he
loathed her. For what? For giving up her career? For docilely agreeing to his every whim and providing him with a home he could be proud of? For sacrificing, yes, sacrificing everything to be Mrs. Arora? (SN 85)

Shobha De very intelligently exposes the evil practices prevalent in the society such as gender discrimination, secondary status of women and double standards. It is hypocritical on the part of Akshay Arora to expect devotion and faithfulness from his wife when he himself involves in a number of extramarital affairs:

Everyone in the industry knew, however, that on the night before the wedding itself… Akshay, sloshed senseless, had driven straight to the house of Silk Simki and stayed there. Even before their honeymoon was over Akshay had betrayed her trust at least half-a-dozen times. He was an indiscriminating womanizer. And a champion hypocrite. (SN 67-68)

Malini has lost her identity and individuality. She, therefore, fits into the image of a traditional Indian woman and appears to be more like a bird in a cage.

Aasha Rani flirts with Akshay, who is unfaithful to Malini hence she accuses and curses Aasha Rani. She says: “But my curse is upon you. You will never
be happy. You will never marry. You will die as you are, without *sindhoor in your maang*. And then, you will remember this day and regret it. But it will be too late.” (83) Rita and even Aasha Rani falls into this category. Marriage becomes an obsession with Aasha Rani, first it was Akshay Arora and then with Abhijit Mehra. The marriage obsession on the part of Aasha Rani clearly indicates that the Indian woman, in spite of her economic independence, does not feel secure without the protection of man. In her childhood the parents protect her, after marriage her husband protects her and later she is protected by her son.

Aasha Rani leaves India for New Zealand where she meets Jamie (Jay) Phillips in a theatre and after an informal introduction they get married and in the course of time Aasha becomes the mother of a beautiful daughter, Sasha. Forgetting that she was a Bollywood star – ‘sweet-heart of the millions’, she is happy with her new roles of wife and mother and keeps herself busy in cooking and house-keeping. A film-star is thus reduced to the status of a housewife. Inspite of the fact, her marriage does not last long as her husband fails to understand her emotional and psychological longings. Her stay in New Zealand results into the loss of her individuality since her husband neglects and looks down upon her. She is compelled to return back to the world which had given her nothing but pain. In India, she receives her
daughter Sasha’s call from New Zealand and is shocked to learn that her husband Jay is having an affair with Alice (Nanny). Aasha Rani is completely confused, despairing, broken and shattered. In order to confirm this she again goes to New Zealand where Jay admits his affair with Alice:

        Still … I won’t bother to deny that she and I were having an affair – well, it is a little more than that … I love the girl. She loves me. And she loves Sasha. Things just worked out that way. I hadn’t planned it. I love you too, but differently. We have grown apart. We have been drifting off quite a while now. I guess it was Sasha who was the common factor. Now that she is older and has a mind of her own, we should allow her to choose the sort of life she wants for herself. (SN 346)

After Jay’s confession of his affair with Alice, she comes to know that her marriage is over and she is betrayed by her husband. Aasha Rani feels utterly lonely and collapses as again she confronts the problem of existence and belongingness – she ponders over the questions such as what is her real place in the world? Where and to whom does she really belong? While returning from New Zealand, in a mood of despair she finds a job in London. But here too, unfortunately she is trapped by Gopalakrishnan who first uses her and later exploits her. Thus at every stage of her life, Aasha Rani falls a
victim to the wicked designs of men as she thinks: “Whichever way one
looked at it, there was always a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and
finally discarding a woman” (157).

Rita, the mouthpiece of Shobha De is the wife of a rich film producer
Kailash who is, like Akshay, equally unfaithful to her. But like Malini, Rita
also does not protest against her subjugation, instead, considers she is lucky
because her husband does not beat her and moreover, allows her to spend as
much money as she wants. The following words of Rita to Malini point out
that the relation between Rita and her husband Kailash is mechanical, and
with emptied emotional attachment. She says:

You know, he is very demanding man in every way –and so
much temptation! Array every day he has beautiful women
falling at his feet, begging him to led them into his bed. But I told
him from day one: “Look here, ji. I am your wife. You give me
proper respect. I don’t want to know about your lafidas. If you
have any affair, just be sensible and don’t let me know or find
out. In public you have to give me the honour I deserve. What
you do behind my back does not concern me. I have my friends,
my work, my shopping, my kitty parties, my foreign holidays,
what more does a woman want? That way Kailashji is very

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considerate. He never questions me about my spending. He allows me to buy whatever I want, whenever I want.” (SN 79)

Thus Rita presents her own case and further advises Akshay’s wife Malini:

‘Look at this way, Sweetie’, Rita crooned, and you have his name. You live well. He is good to you – I mean, there is no violence in your marriage. Akshayji doesn’t beat you or anything. What more do you expect? Romance finishes the morning after the wedding night. After that what? Boredom. Men like variety. We women have to put up with that and switch our minds to something else. Why don’t you play rummy? It is relaxing. It will take your mind off all this. Of course, at this point you hate Akshayji. That is normal. In any case, most women hate their husbands – it is a fact. They hate marriage. That is also a fact. But what else can they do? What is the choice?’ (SN 84)

The above conversation between Malini and Rita makes it clear that it is also due to the weakness of women they are dominated, ill-treated and exploited by men. In addition, age-old traditions of society empower men to suppress and torment women as Aasha Rani’s father tells to Aasha Rani: “Men are cruel. Very cruel. There is no justice in this world. And no equality
between men and women” (331). Thus through Malini, Rita and others Shobha De suggests that the men particularly in \textit{filmi duniya} are unfaithful in their family life and therefore, their wives have the stories of mental and physical suffering and humiliation to tell. The wives are generally treated as commodities. In the words of Aasha Rani:

The bigger the hero, the more miserable his wife mused Aasha Rani… So the wives are only pulled out of obscurity on ‘important’ functions such as premieres, festivals and other V.I.P. affairs which call for social conformity. Then she is expected to reflect her husband’s position in the industry and behave in accordance with his status … (SN 329)

The other important aspect which the novelist highlights in this novel is the role of a woman in the oppression and suffering of her fellow woman. It is also reality that the women themselves are responsible for the suffering caused to their fellow women, in one capacity or the other. In our society, women ill-treat and exploit women instead of showing respect, love and understanding for their own sex. Thus novelist brings out the universal psychological reality that the woman is the enemy of the woman. The novel presents varied patriarchal ways the women are oppressed and suppressed. Here, De seems to be a spokesman of new morality and for her, “Writing is
Pure Sex”. (De, Shobha, ‘Writing is Pure Sex’). She speaks very candidly about sex. She makes us to envisage female as neither ‘weaker sex’ nor ‘second sex’ and draws our attention to the fact that sex is used as an instant fast-food in the Bollywood.

In her third novel Sisters, Shobha De shifts her attention from the aristocrats of high class society and the stars of the glamorous world of Mumbai film industry to the rich and powerful people of the business world. Sisters, is the story of the two sisters’ relations. Mikki and Alisha, the young and beautiful daughters of Seth Hiralal are wealthy socialite women. They are driven by ambition and lust and are at war with each other. The novelist depicts them as the upper class business women of modern India. In this novel also Shobha De deals with the themes of family, career and marriage. It is the prime fact that the novelist gives the topmost priority to family and this is crystal-clear when she evinces her ideas about marriage which match to Robert Burns (1963: 34) who says:

Marriage is a social institution wherein two individuals have to live together. There can’t be any inequality in this area. The partners depend upon each other in the same manner as the ‘bow’ and the ‘arrow’. If one of the partners dominates the other, it will not serve any purpose. If two persons with their distinct
personalities wish to live a united life based on love, each of them must understand the other. Each individual must have the necessary knowledge, courage and determination to face the turbulent waves of the sea of marriage. Staying married is hard work. There is a vast labour required to keep any home going. The woman is her home, busy about her tasks, washing the dishes, making the beds, doing one of the highest tasks to which human hands can set themselves and when her husband helps her they are achieving together an enduring relationship.

But the turbulent waves of the sea of marriage of Mikki result into a fearsome cyclone in which her married life shatters the urban women’s dream of happy married life.

Mikki is the protagonist who, after the mysterious death of her father in an air-crash, returns to India from U.S.A. In her youth, the responsibility of her father’s business, which was on the verge of bankruptcy, falls on her shoulders. Shanay, Navin and Binny Malhotra – suitors of Mikki then were the big ‘Sharks’ ready to swallow her. In the hope to get moral support and also to save her father’s industries, Mikki, in the beginning, agrees to marry Navin but in vain. As Navin is dependent on his mother and fails to respond Mikki the way she expects, she breaks her engagement with Navin. But Binny
Malhotra takes the advantage of this situation of crisis. In order to attract Mikki, he offers her costly gifts and also promises financial help. He traps Mikki very shrewdly by establishing premarital sex relations with her. As a result she is compelled to marry him against her will. Thus it is Binny who gets both Mikki and all the property of her father. He does save her father’s industries but Mikki has to pay heavy price for it as after marriage Binny starts showing his true colours. He continues his extra-marital affairs and Mikki is reduced to a domestic doll.

There is a great contrast between Mikki and Shobha De’s other women characters who try to escape themselves from the clutches of married life whereas Mikki herself gets trapped in marriage with Binny. She has no aversion to be a wife. But what she does not like is the inhuman subordination and confining of woman into four walls of the house. Mikki thinks that it is her pride in being the wife of Binny. The narrator tells:

She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon. If this was what her man wanted, if this was what made him happy, she would give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her body, her mind, her soul. She was in love with him. And he was finally hers. (*Sisters* 109)
Thus she completely surrenders and submits herself to Binny like a traditional woman. Further, the novelist exposes the helplessness of a typical traditional Indian woman in the words of Mikki when she says: “He is like a God to me. I don’t care who he sleeps with. All I care is that I am his wife and that he comes home to me.” (124) this total submission of Mikki on one hand and the established norms on the other, are further responsible for her oppression, subjugation and exploitation by Binny.

Binny Malhotra is a true representative of patriarchal system. His attitude to Mikki is that of a dominant male and he treats her as his slave. He does not like his wife to be an active partner both in life and business. He even does not like Mikki to come to the office or conduct business meetings. He says that what he needs is a wife:

No. that is not how it works in my family. Our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going. No business meetings. (Sisters 109)

This upsets Mikki completely but she can do nothing because she is well aware of her precarious position. In reality her fall begins when all her property is transferred to Binny. Her condition further deteriorates when her husband suspects her affair with Lucio and drives her out of his home. Even
then Mikki does not protest and merely appeals to him and in her appeal too she does not appear as ultra-modern or challenging woman. She appears to be more meek and submissive in her approach when she tells to her friend Amy about her helplessness:

‘Amy… you aren’t going to believe this … but I don’t want to fix him. Trouble is, I love the man. Call me a doormat, a slave, a victim, anything. But, I feel hopeless and helpless. It is as if I have forgotten what pride is…or ever was. He can, and does, trample all over me’. (Sisters 119)

Through this situation of Mikki, the novelist throws light on the bitter realities of patriarchal society. The fall of Mikki is wife complete when finally her husband Binny Malhotra goes in for a divorce. Mikki faces a psychic conflict and is divided between a personal self and that of a social self.

The novel shows how the women are victims to male-passions. For example, Seth Hiralal, a married man, had raped his watchman’s wife Sapna who died in an abortion. Alisha is his daughter from his mistress Leelaben. Binny Malhotra has a mistress and children even then he marries Mikki and forces her to go ahead with an abortion otherwise he will divorce her. He wants to reduce Mikki to a mere object of lust. Motherhood is an important stage in a woman’s life but it is denied to Mikki because she has to keep
herself always fit for him. She tells her friend Amy: “He wants me to remain firm and tight for his pleasure” (119). Again it is through Binny Malhotra that the novelist throws significant light on the subjugation and marginalization of women in general and Mikki in particular. He scornfully tells Mikki:

‘Listen very carefully, princesses. This is no longer your father’s home and you are no longer the pampered child. You are Binny Malhotra’s wife…. You will never, I repeat, never question me… or complain … Your job is to look beautiful. I told you that when I married you. Buy clothes. Buy jewellery. Go to the beauty parlour. Play bridge. Learn golf. Attend cooking classes. That is all. But, no questions – you don’t have the right. …When I say, “Butter my toast”, you butter it. That is all. (Sisters 116)

Though all these women belong to the urban world, they are subdued and hence cannot fight against being just sex objects. Another important aspect of the novel is the underworld culture spreading fast in the corrupt business world of Mumbai. Ramanbhai, a true representative of this world, is a trusted employee of Seth Hiralal. However, after the death of Mikki’s father, it is he who constantly discourages and prevents Mikki from taking interest in business with an intention to grab all her property. He frightens and tries to reduce her to a puppet in his hand. He threatens to Mikki:
Had you been a son, your father might have taken you into his confidence from a young age and guided you properly from the beginning. But as a daughter, all he wanted for you was a good husband – that is all. … My advice is – leave these serious matters to me. I am there to handle them. Trust me. I will guard your interests like a father. But you will make things difficult for yourself if you do things without consulting me. (Sisters 30)

In this corrupt business world money has become a God and personal human relations are like the clothes discarded. It is the world where women are taken as sex-toys in the hands of men to play with. Hence, the novelist has used images of ‘Vultures’ and ‘Sharks’ for the corrupt people of the business world and ‘Mouse’ and ‘Fish’ for the women victims. Here through these images Shobha De points out the predicament of Mikki in the words of Anjanaben: “The girl is like a mall mouse with vultures all around just waiting to pounce on her”. (27)

Alisha, an illegitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal and sister of Mikki, is the second important woman character in the novel. In the beginning of the novel we find that she is shocked and surprised greatly by the obituary of her father. She is disappointed and discouraged as she finds no place for her in the obituary. Therefore, her questions, ‘And what about me? What am I? A
puppy? A kitten? A pet?” (3) Reveal that she has no identity and individuality of her own. Though Alisha and Mikki are sisters, there is a sharp contrast between them. And it is this contrast that really helps the enrichment of the plot of the novel. Alisha values money more than human relations whereas for Mikki blood relations are more important than wealth. Mikki is considerate; on the contrary Alisha is rough and abusive. Mikki loves Alisha but the latter hates Mikki.

Finally, it is not only the rich upper class women who suffer at the hands of men, but even ordinary women like Taarini suffer within the constraints of marriage. Thus the novelist focuses the fact that suffering is the common lot of women, irrespective of their class and race.

With Sultry Days Shobha De returns to the mainstream writing. About this novel she says, “Finally a book by me that they (my children) can read.” It is the very first male-centered novel. Then protagonist Deb is referred as God by his college friends. But it is through Nisha, the narrator, we learn about him. In this novel, the typical male attitude that does not accept a different image of woman from the already established patriarchal view reveals through the words of Dharam who thinks, “once a bitch, always a bitch.’ (271) The protagonist says that, “One bitch is as good as another.” (252) His attitude towards girls is also simple, “Use them and leave them.” (8)
Such attitude of men towards women clearly puts forth the miserable plight and marginalization of women in our society. They are victims of male domination.

In Shobha De’s novels women often turn and function against one another to insult, degrade and exploit their women companions; for example, in *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani’s sister Sudha Rani turns against her and tries to snatch the position held by her in the film industry. Similarly, *Sisters* is a story of two warring sisters – Mikki and Alisha.

*Second Thoughts*, the masterpiece deals with an arranged marriage of a young, educated, middle class Bengali girl Maya, who is born and brought up in Calcutta, with Ranjan Malik, a foreign returned bank official from Bombay. Her Marriage life is doomed to failure because of their entirely different background and attitudes to life. Her Husband’s and her’s different temperament has resulted in their strained relationship. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional whereas Ranjan is insensitive, detached and aloof. She has tenderness and warmth amd Ranjan is hard and cold. As a result, Maya’s marriage with Ranjan becomes more or less a marriage of convenience. Her marital relationship is totally dissatisfying for Ranjan considers a woman not more than an object. He feels more attached to his mother even after his marriage. In short, it is due to her husband’s traditional...
attitude and feeling of superiority, Maya feels herself trapped in a neglected and meaningless life. Their relationship is marked by the lack of mutual love and respect on the part of both. She knows no happiness due to her dull and indifferent husband. She is completely disillusioned.

It is a sad tale of a traditional and oppressed wife and at the same time a serious look at the modern-day marriage. In this novel Shobha De realistically presents the psyche of the traditional men and women. Therefore, compared to her earlier works, this novel is a class apart for her instead of presenting aggressive aristocratic women, the novelist concentrates on showing the different ways in a male-dominated social set up, that is always active in silencing a woman’s voice and places her on the margin. Moreover, the high class society which is the background of her earlier novel is, for the first time replaced by the middle class society. It is in this type of society that the terms of marriage are settled according to the traditionally accepted norms of patriarchy, naturally, these prevailing norms restrict both the partners to definite roles. A superior position to the husband in a male-dominated society is the unwritten law. Man considers it as his privilege to control the life of his female counterpart. All these ideas justify woman’s constant subjugation in the family. The novelist suggests that woman in this kind of scenario cannot feel free and independent as she is unable to enjoy equal status. By presenting
a different aspect of female behaviour, the novelist shows her deep concern for woman’s suppression and suffering in a traditional Indian middle class family.

In this fast changing scenario of post-Independent India, men claim to be the products of modern age but they follow traditions and age-old norms and values. The fact is that they may have advanced as individuals, but in the marital set up, it is man who is still the lord and master. Naturally, woman is expected to abide by his whims whether she likes it or not. It seems rather contradictory that on one hand women are expected to be educated and on the other they are condemned to be docile and mild existence within the marital set up. The same mental culture we come across in Second Thoughts. Ranjan has a degree of an American University and is a successful bank executive living in Mumbai. But so far as his wife, Maya is concerned, he imposes certain restrictions on her. She is not free to go anywhere in the city and mix with other women of the metropolitan city. Though she is an educated woman, she is not allowed to do any job as her husband has declared at their first meeting, “I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman’s duty to run a good home” (10-11). Next, she cannot share her feelings with anyone. The STD facility on phone is locked for her. There is complete control even on the use of the air-conditioner. Once, Maya
buys a present, Ranjan gets furious and asks her, "But why? It is not my birthday. You shouldn’t waste money like this? He further warns her, "And ... in future, Maya, ask me before you buy something. Everything costs money, you know. I hate waste" (266). Besides this, she cannot bear any child. Then what else she can do? Nothing. Therefore, she feels useless, depressed and lonely. In her craving Maya exposes the reality in this way:

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belonged to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I didn’t have a single friend to call my own. (ST 266-267)

Maya is reduced to the average life of an average Indian housewife. She is well aware of the restrictions imposed on her as married woman. But as a human being she needs the companionship of a man in order to satisfy her physical and psychological needs. Nikhil, her young neighbour provides her temporary relief from the suffocating atmosphere created by her incompatible marriage. But ironically in a male-dominated society, Nikhil is not much different from the other men in his outlook and treatment to Maya. If Ranjan is careless to Maya’s physical and emotional needs and causes great misery to her, it is Nikhil who exploits Maya’s suppressed and marginalized position.
The novelist here intends to suggest that extra-marital relation cannot be a solution to the problems of oppressed and subjugated women.

Maya experiences loneliness and isolation due to the unresponsive, selfish and suppressive nature of her husband. Ranjan expects her to do all the household chores and sarcastically remarks whether she has forgotten how to do it. He further tells her that since she is not doing a career, she should keep herself busy looking after the house. However, Maya remains calm and quiet but the novelist explores what is going on in her mind by her ‘inner voice’:

I had bitten my tongue in dismay. I had wanted to say that I had worked in Calcutta, done household chores, but I had never been made to feel like a servant. A menial. I didn’t have a problem about doing my own housework. It was Ranjan’s attitude that hurt me. The bank provided him a fairly generous allowance and we could well have afforded full-time help. But Ranjan was adamant. (ST 47)

Though a textile engineer, she is not allowed to take up even a part time job. Instead, she is reminded of the duties of a married woman, by her husband. He says:

‘Look, Maya… I have had a hard day at the office. I am not in a mood to talk rubbish with you. I have some papers to read …
You will realize on your own that a housewife’s duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top. That is where her true happiness lies. You have seen my mother’s house- learn from her’. (ST 56)

Again and again Ranjan reminds her ‘tradition’. He always wants to consult his mother for every decision and the wife has to just comply with it. Ranjan has a fixed image of a wife and Maya has to conform to it. Rajan fails to understand his wife’s desires and often makes her aware of the set rule that crushes her real feelings. On one occasion he tells her, “This is a respectable house. There are certain rules. You have to abide by them whether you like it or not.” (83) In his duty to her he offers Maya “nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and four square meals a day.” (263) He never thinks about her emotional desires. Therefore, here Ranjan’s attitude represents the dominating, indifferent and unfeeling behaviour of a traditional Indian husband lacks in seeing his wife as an individual having her own takes and needs but as he only a house wife in a family. Shobha De describes this typical Indian attitude through the words of Maya’s uncle who says, “In any Indian family, the husband’s comforts always come first. Everything else follows.” (11) Thus in Second Thoughts we see Maya suffering endlessly due
to her secondary and subordinate position in the family. These and several other instances justify the subjugation and marginalization of women in India.

The two other women, who contribute to the tragedy of Maya are- her own mother, Chitra and Ranjan’s mother, Mrs. Malik. A careful study of these women reveals that both Maya and Ranjan are strongly influenced by the traditional attitude of their respective parents. For instance, regarding the choice of daughter-in-law Mrs. Malik once comments:

If you ask me, it is always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background. Grief comes to man who marries above his station. A wealthier wife spells doom. 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 were so careful while selecting the right candidate for Ranjan. (ST 231)

Similar is the opinion of Maya’s mother, Chitra who says, “The issue is, Maya, marriage involves sacrifice. And all the sacrificing has to be undertaken by the woman”. (253) There is no sound-sex relationship between two as Ranjan loves Maya the way one loves a pet in the house. Maya’s inner urge for contact and communion remains unfulfilled. There are moments when she shows an almost aggressive urge for sexual reunion with Ranjan. But, asleep or awake he is never one with her in the world of senses. On the
other hand, she is a victim of traditional marriage system in India. Maya’s position is like a trapped bird. She is not able to escape from her present. Though she is the key person, master figure in the family looking after everything, she lives the life of slavery, subjugation, suffering and suppression. Thus Shobha De attempts to examine the frustrations and yearnings of a woman who is intelligent, sensitive and educated, but who remains deeply unhappy in her marriage. The novelist suggests through Maya that marriage very often leads a woman to a prison in the form of her husband’s house. There is no escape for the tradition bound Indian woman from her image of helpless even in the metropolitan setting of Mumbai. As a matter of fact, in Indian society, women are subordinate to men in every respect, the traditional marriage system and its outdated concepts, in which free blossoming spirit of a woman is being crushed. Further, the financial dependence of women on men causes misery to women.

De paints an engrossing picture of the chaos of the real world of her female characters. The husband-wife relationship in her fictional world seems to be superfluous as the predicament faced by them due to the burden of living together, willingly or unwillingly, is irksome. There is an emotional agitation and inner frustration that leads to their unhappiness.
It is a fact that except a few well known women in the literary, social and political circles, the world today is still male-dominated. But the success of these women cannot be taken as a measure of the condition of women in general. For the ordinary women there is still a hopeless apathy towards their suffering. No doubt, the situation is improving yet it is far from satisfactory. It cannot be denied that everywhere women workers are overworked and underpaid. It is expected that at least in democratic countries like India women should be treated as equal to men. But it is the tragic fact that even in these countries the right to equality and freedom exists only in the constitution. Now women have started working in the fields overbores by men but that has not brought an end to male domination. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the fact that women have taken up jobs only after they have obtained consent of the male members of their family. Therefore, under the prevailing situation, women must realize that they have to survive themselves in the male hegemony. For this, the subjugated and marginalized women must develop the unity and integrity of mind, firmness of purpose, courage, self-extermination and self-assertion. ‘That long silence’ since time immemorial has to be broken out.