As the Indian society gives great importance to the family unit, Indian novelists have dealt with family relationships very seriously in their novels. The theme of man-woman relationship has been the cornerstone of these novels as it has a great historical, sociological and cultural significance in India. Novels written in the past few decades have dealt with experiences of women in both domestic as well as professional fronts, thereby presenting a realistic picture of female psyche. After independence, Education and social awareness greatly influenced the Indian society, which was earlier conventional and tradition bound. These forces brought about rampant changes in the prevailing customs, attitudes and beliefs of the people. In fact, the modern literature is making attempts at redressing the age old imbalance at creating and reflecting a new social order which no longer wishes to downgrade women but rather considers them autonomous and transcendent. This accelerated a tendency which favored a new order in place of the old. During the last few decades, a drastic social change has been marked in the Indian society that has touched the fringes of the family. The family unit too has undergone a significant change in its structure, values and roles of various relationships.

The husband-wife relationship that is the key component in a family relation has undergone a vital change due to the growing enlightenment and movement for emancipation of women. "Fiction today is seriously taking into consideration these changing perceptions of the society and particularly man-woman relationship, played a sterling role in raising the reader’s consciousness. (Sunil Seema, Man-Woman Relationship in Indian Fiction, 9)"

In various forms, it has 'provided a glimpse into female psyche' and 'dealt with the full range of female experience'. (9) It portrays without inhibitions, 'the new liberated woman who refuses to play a second fiddle to her husband,'(9) in any sphere of life. While woman has consolidated her position, she refuses to submit to her husband or in-laws (or anyone for that matter) in a servile manner. Socio-economic changes in contemporary India has brought about a vital change in the outlook and patriarchal attitude of Indians towards gender issues. "From the sociological point of view, the role of husband-wife is the principal component in a family that has undergone a vital change due to growing enlightenment and the movement for emancipation of women."(Sunil Seema 9) These developments are reflected in literature as
well, as creative writers have re-defined the husband–wife equation in their works. Contemporary Indian writers project an image of woman that is totally different from that of the past. Women of today are becoming aware of the biased attitude of the society. They have started asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. They belong to the new generation. They don't believe in the old traditional notion of man being the big boss who chooses a wife according to his fancy.

Havelock Ellis propounds that, "Marriage in the biological sense is a sexual relationship entered into with the intention of making it permanent, even apart from whether or not it has received sanction of law or the Church." (Sur 3) The savage races of the world are also known to "live under a well-regulated marriage system". (3) Promiscuity in marriage is considered an offence in every society. "Family, the smallest sociological unit implies marriage, implicit or explicit, which in turn lent this unit stability, togetherness and mutual care". (Chandra Subhash 142)

Alexander Walker sums up the benefits of a family in following words:

The advantages resulting from the states of marriage are that the two sexes may reciprocally satisfy the natural desires which are felt equally by each……... that they equally submit the exercise of the reproductive organs to a healthy regularity; that they may equally perpetuate their common species; that they may equally by respective duties, provide for the children proceeding from their mutual union; that they may equally assist each other throughout life by reciprocal affection and care; that they may in old age receive the cares of their common progeny; and that they may, in health and well being, reach that age which all these circumstances generally enable married pairs to attain. (75)

Walker further asserts that, "History proves that marriage is essential to the well-being of human society, and that celibacy brings ruin upon states." (80)

In India, the institution of marriage is considered to be of unrivalled significance in the life of a person. In the life of a woman it marks a point of maturing. It signifies the flowering of life. The Hindu Scriptures or Dharmashastras consider marriage a sacrament.
The institution of marriage has provided for the societies need for love, security and children. Simone De Beauvoir’s observation that “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (500) is nowhere truer than in India. Marriage is thus considered a great ambition and ultimate goal for a girl. In an Indian society, which is essentially patriarchal, a girl is brought up in the strict control of her parents with the view that she has to be given to her new master, her husband, who should find her acceptable, meeting his expectations. "Marriage and Family are the means used by society to control promiscuous sex and dissipation of man's energy which could be directed and used in many other usual channels, without at the same time, suppressing sex." states Pandharinath. H. Prabhu (209)

On account of various factors such as sexual promiscuity, women’s growing economic self dependence, the restless exacting spirit, often hysterical spirit …which tends towards discontent, indiscretion and divorce,” (Cooley Charles234) the institute however is now on the verge of breaking up. Marriages are no longer thought to be made in heaven. Educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De’s novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death is replaced generally by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated any time depending upon the whims of the partners. Shobha De considers this change in attitude towards marriage a big step forward. Shobha De has dealt with various themes in her novels, such as, love, marriage, sex, feminism, alienation, search for identity, loneliness, decadence of man etc. One of the most prominent themes that figures out in her novels is the relationship between wife and husband. In most of her novels, the relationship between wife and husband crops up as the major concern that forces her to discuss the issue in the contemporary world in the most objective manner. Marriage in Indian tradition is an institution as well as destiny, but its nature is completely changed today.

The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat.

If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a lifelong meal-ticket. Divorce, too, has got to
be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go. (De, Shooting From the Hips 112)

Shobha De holds revolutionary ideas about marriage and husband-wife relationships. Her female protagonists are remarkable when measured against men. The husband-wife relation is strained in many of the De’s novels. The reason for the tensions between the two varies from novel to novel.

…the lives of young men and women particularly rich upper class (business community) people who no longer considered faithfulness and constancy in love a virtue. That is why she (De) depicts the people in their true colors, i.e. what they are rather than what they should have been. But the description of the union between the lovers or wife-husbands becomes too vulgar and open to be enjoyable. It offends our sensibilities and distracts our attention (Ningthoujam 25)

Shobha De has presented a new philosophy regarding man-woman relationship in context to modern times. The man-woman complimentary image has been completely shattered in her novels. She firmly affirms that “the social and conventional basis of marriage is being eroded and this would ultimately lead to a situation where marriage may not need to be solemnized. Their relationship may be continued as long as they trust each other and the basic emotion lasts. Each unit must behave more or less in an autonomous fashion within his or her personal sphere.”(De 48)

The novels of Shobha De indicate the disintegration of the family under the strain of failure of reciprocal relationship between man and woman and their mutual adjustment. The age old institution of family and marriage has been under tremendous strain in modern times, primarily in the western culture, and also in the rich stratum of the Indian society. (Chandra Subhash143) One of the major factors for the disintegration of family is the rampant promiscuity in sexual relations. Yet another cause of this disintegration is that by winning the right to enter the labour market, woman has found a certain degree of freedom that makes marriage less necessary, resulting in estrangement between a man and his wife. David Mc
Reynolds also believes that the Family system is disintegrating. As he observes: "... nor can a person find his identity in the family, for that institution is breaking up." (203)

Simone de Beauvoir propounds that "Marriage subjugates and enslaves women. It leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose." (Beauvoir 500) Shobha De has fearlessly opposed the subordination and subjugation of women in the Indian milieu. Her protagonists are remarkably sensible and sensitive to protest against the shibboleths that are no longer relevant. These women ask for a re-interpretation of Indian social and cultural history. They have developed a distinct personality, having acquired liberal education that has broadened their outlook in life. They do not abide by the age old notion which places man at a higher pedestal in terms of knowledge and wisdom. These young westernized women, who are thoroughly grounded in English studies and have imbibed the etiquettes and mental ability of the elite class, have developed a liberal, humane outlook towards life.

Shobha De commenced her literary carrier with the publication of her tour de force Socialite Evenings in the year 1988. Socialite Evenings, the first novel by the journalist author, presents the institution of family and marriage as it exists in the wealthy class of Indian society. The novel is about the journey of a prominent socialite Karuna, from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient neo-rich woman. Karuna the female protagonist is a Mumbai socialite who marries for money and leaves her husband as soon as she finds him incompatible. The novel is set against the backdrop of Mumbai high society and the lives of bored, rich house wives trapped in loveless marriages and involved in ill-fated extramarital affairs. "In the fictional cosmos of the book, the family is crumbling and marriage comes to be re-defined." (Chandra Subhash 143) Socialite Evenings presents three couples disturbed by tension among their relationships as husband and wife. Women in particular are marginalized by their husbands, discarding their roles in the family. The women characters in this novel live a life of fun, enjoyment and self – indulgence regardless of the pain and unhappiness that are bound to come by having led such reckless lives. All they care about is their status and wealth. The novel also gives the picture of the marginalization of the Indian women at the hands of their husbands.
All main women characters in *Socialite Evenings* are non-conformists. Anjali and Karuna are highly attractive and charming; ambitious and daring women, who come from a conservative middle class family background. They throw off the conventional moral values, as they rise from their middle class background to the upper most rung of the society by intrigue and plot. They aspire to be wealthy and famous, for which they leave their conventional middle class family and set out in search of freedom. Freedom that is boundless, unlimited and overflowing. Their marriage is for convenience and little do they bother about the nature and character of the man whom they are marrying, as long as he is affluent and belongs to the upper class, they don’t care as to what kind of man their husband will turn out to be in long run or how long their marriage will last. "The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom with no notion of marital fidelity."( Chandra Subhash 143)

Karuna, the protagonist hails from a conservative middle class Maharastrian family from a small town Satara near Poona. The novel is in the form of her memoir. She does not remember much of her childhood except her father’s strict vigilance. Her mother a simple hearted house wife is so preoccupied with household chores that she does not know what her teenage daughter is doing. Karuna’s life changes as soon as her bureaucrat father gets transferred to Mumbai. She starts dreaming of a carrier in films, modeling and fashion designing. She becomes so ambitious to be a part of the high society that she defies her father’s strict conservative rules and joins the glamorous world of modeling much against her father’s wishes. She leaves her middle class values and moral standards and embraces the pomp and show of the rich upper class. Throughout the novel, Karuna declines to dog the traditional path of etiquette and manners. Her modeling career introduces her to the Mumbai’s high society. It is here that Karuna meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy Abbas Tyabji(Abe). Her meeting with Anjali virtually turns out to be crucial and instrumental in her development into a bold, self dependent; and progressive woman and as a successful member of the higher society. Eventually Anjali becomes Karuna’s mentor and guide.

When Karuna enters college and gets married to an old classmate and a rich businessman, the family accepts him because of his social status. Karuna marries him only
with an eye on his social status and money. "Economic security for wife seems to be the cornerstone of this marriage arrangement which appears more like a contract than a vibrant, living emotional relationship." (Chandra Subhash 143) But very soon Karuna discovers that he is not the right husband material. She confesses that she had married “the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. He was just an average Indian husband –unexciting, uninspiring, untutored. He was not made for introspection. He was not looking for any stimulation either intellectually or emotionally.”(SE 65) She gets bored with her husband who does not share her interests, tries to drawn her blues in reading books and crossword puzzles. Her husband is not at all bothered about her sentiments and desires. He is busy with his own rise in the corporate world. ties Karuna’s marriage turn’s out to be a cold, loveless affair. "Devoid of emotional warmth and entered into for expediency, such marriages often break down, leading to divorce and sundering of the family "( Chandra Subhash 143) Her marriage is a failure since it is without love, joy and mutual faith. Karuna does not find her marriage exciting, as she says, “Marriage is nothing to be excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to.”(SE68) Karuna voices her protest about her futile and meaningless marital relationship: “I think our marriage was over the day our honeymoon started. We’ve got nothing going. I don’t love you-never have. As for you –I really don’t think you even know who you married.”(68) There is a complete emotional void in their relationship. Only silence, compromise and adjustment seem to prevail between the estranged couple. "All the husbands of my friends more or less fell into this pattern. They were not evil men, but what they did to our lives went beyond evil. We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized."(69) Karuna has just formal relations with her husband. Intimacy between the two seems to be missing altogether. It is the lack of proper communication and mutual trust in her marriage which bothers her. Bogged down by the boredom prevailing in her marriage, she sometimes dreams of “the perfect marriage.”(60) This comparison of her own ridiculous situation with the happy ones enjoyed by some lucky people makes her further miserable.

A marriage full of laughter and conversation. One in which the two of us were perfectly in tune. Speaking the same language, thinking the same thoughts, enjoying the same things. It wasn’t that I never tried, but there was no question that my husband I inhibited different planets.(60)
As compared to Karuna- the outgoing and fun-loving, smart lady, her husband proves to be a dull and boring person. Significantly neither the narrator nor her husband refers to the other by name; each calls the other only "husband' and "wife" which denotes the "impersonality of one of the most informal and intimate relationships."(Chandra Subhash 146) As a wife Karuna epitomizes the misery of a woman in India, “I felt like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motions of house-keeping and playing wife but the resentment and rebellion remained just under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation…” (69) This marital boredom and impulsive desire for fun and excitement leads her to cheat her husband and establish an extramarital affair with Krish, her husband’s close friend. Karuna discards the dogmatic rules of 'a hackneyed and worn out tradition' for sustaining and cherishing her extra marital relationship with Krish. (Swain S.P 136) She plans for a holiday in Venice with her lover Krish. She considers this beyond sin. Karuna brazenly adopts a militant attitude towards her husband when he tries to prevent her from enjoying a week long sexual orgy with Krish in Rome. “While he was innocently instructing me, I was already planning, when and how I’d meet Krish -At the airport? Hotel ? What we’d do together –how liberated and free we’d feel without any pressure on us.” (72)

A woman in Indian society marries not just the man but also his family and subsequently loses her identity in marriage, relinquishes her freedom and sets about pleasing everybody. But the new generation of women with their new found release from matrimonial bondage adopt different perspectives and revolt against the old order. De's women are such liberated individuals in search of a niche in their lives through escapades and sexcapades.( Swain 137)

Anjali enacts a marriage of convenience with Abe, “an experienced rake with a wild reputation” (SE12) for he is rich and so could give her all the luxury that she had dreamt of. Anjali knew beforehand that Abe had a wild reputation with women. Anjali is unhindered; to her Abe is the golden egg-laying goose. She even procures young virgin girls for Abe’s sexual gratification. Arjun, Anjali's brother works for Abe in some 'vague capacity', which actually means being Abe's boozing partner and pimp, He "rounded up the pretty Hindu virgins whom Abe was partial to whenever he threw one of his wild parties."(11) Anjali is
not at all jealous when Abe takes a new girl to bed. "Abe has some regulars with whom he sleeps, apart from the occasional pick ups." (12) These are like routine work and Anjali is used to it. Anjali has her own set of lovers. Like her husband she is equally reckless in her sexual behavior. Both of them revel in orgiastic rituals. Her passion for sex is illimitable indeed as the novel bristles with her frequent sexual encounters. Anjali throws off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rises to the social status of the upper classes. Having passion for illimitable sex she has frequent sex encounters and rejoices in orgiastic acrobatics. She enacts marriage of choice. She is after the desire of the body, the itching of the sensations.

Feeling bored with nothing meaningful to do, Anjali starts taking French lessons and lands herself in the bed of the young French teacher, even though she had declared that "she was married woman, much older and really not one of those sleep around types." (77) She hops to France with the French lover for a fortnight orgy of sex with him. She has no qualms even when she develops illicit relationship with an innocent, baby-faced very young boy Karan, who age-wise, could well be her son. As the narrator says," She was in love again, but this time she managed to stun me, because this time she had picked up a boy, fit to be her son" (95) There is consistent repetitiveness in her description of the affair: "This is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me....What Karan and I share is a very tender and beautiful relationship." (95) But the affair ends in a disaster. Life to Anjali means only men and money. Marriage in no way puts any restraint on Anjali's and Abe's respective sexual orgies.

Locked up in a fragile and futile marital knot, Karuna was leading a life of emotional frigidity. There was no meaningful communication between the partners. No smiles and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, no queries and questions but silence, only silence. Karuna admits," It wasn't that I never tried, but there was no question that my husband and I inhabited different planets (S.E. 68)

Karuna gets divorce from her husband and takes up a carrier in advertising. She succeeds in carving out a niche for herself in this highly competitive world. She becomes financially independent. She starts leading a wild, reckless life. To these women marriage and family do not matter. All they crave for is convenience, fun and unlimited liberty. Anjali and
Karuna are now companions in evil. Both of them are involved in licentious relationships. Anjali has several involvements with her male friends. She makes wild sexual adventures, first with a Belgian photographer, then with a young boy Karan who is approximately her daughter’s age. After her divorce from Abe, she once again looks for a new companion who can fill her husband’s place and whose riches could be used by her to keep up with her luxurious life-style. Anjali finds her desired mate once again in the filthy rich Kumar Bhandari, a homosexual, who fulfills his sexual lust with a young boy Murty, and who has his own crazy style of passionate sessions with young boys. She leaves Kumar alone with his own fantasies and in return gets the financial security and enjoys luxuries without which she cannot live. But one day Anjali—the crazy nymphomaniac suddenly shuns the path of debauchery and becomes a religious devotee. With all her penchant for variety and frequency in extra-marital relations and with her slogan, "Give me sex any day," she is transformed into a sexless religion-minded devotee.

Anjali has though changed her attitude towards life, but she had to pay a big price for this. Her stormy sexual affairs, have taken toll on her only daughter Mimi, who had been neglected all these years. She grows up to be a hurt, withdrawn girl, finding her security and solace in drugs. Anjali fails as a mother; all her wild deeds so far adversely affect her innocent young daughter. Obsessed with their pleasures and fun, Anjali and Abe did not take proper care of their only child, who eventually became a psychopath. Likewise, the narrator's sister gets divorced from her Engineer husband in England and lives alone, practicing as a doctor in London.

Karuna and Anjali are not the only women who succumb to immoral love-adventures. Another woman who engages herself to illicit relationships is Ritu. Ritu’s marriage goes haywire due to her promiscuous relationships. Despite the fact that she is married, she falls for Gul, an underworld don and smuggler, who possesses enormous wealth. Her love affair with Gul turns out to be very humiliating for her, as she is reduced to a pimp, procuring girls for Gul and his friends. In utter frustration she becomes an alcoholic and a drug addict. She puts on a lot of weight and loses her charm in life. After all her crazy loitering in the world of unfaithful lovers, Ritu finally returns to her husband, who forgives her and takes her back. The wild adventures of Ritu and Anjali clearly reflect that these modern society women have
a tendency for extra-marital relationships that has detrimental impact on their family life and children.

After three years of torrid romance between Karuna and Krish, the relation comes to an end, as Krish denies marrying her. Karuna realizes that their affair was nothing more than a sex game. She breaks off her relationship with Krish, and becomes independent, liberated from both her husband as well as lover. Divorced by husband and dejected by lover, Karuna also gets terribly upset over the termination of her unwanted pregnancy. She hereby learns that betrayal is endemic to all man-woman relationships. She is compelled to take up odd jobs at first but later with Anjali’s help she finds a lucrative job. Once money starts flowing in, Karuna finds herself free and able to look at life afresh. Freed of her marital obligations, Karuna is now able to look after her aging parents, and it gives her satisfaction to be of some use to them. She starts enjoying her new found freedom, and engages herself in creative works. She declines her husband’s offer to come back home. She does not want to lose her new freedom.

Girish Sridhar, a famous art film-maker, offers her a role in his movie Shakuntala. The two have an instinctive affinity for one another. Girish Sridhar approaches her with a marriage proposal, that she out rightly declines, even though her parents urge her to marry him. She apprehends that even if Girish and she enjoy a lot of common interest between them, she could not be happy with any man. Her present state of independence gave her so much contentment that she cannot think of marrying again and binding herself to anyone. Pleading from the opposite angle, Karuna’s mother informs her of the problems faced by women in patriarchal society. She also speaks of the various kinds of real difficulties and hardships a woman living single and alone has to encounter. “A woman cannot live alone. It is not safe. We are here today but who knows about tomorrow. A woman needs a man’s protection. Society can be very cruel.” (SE 275-276) Karuna turns down every marriage proposal that comes her way and is firm on her determination to remain single.

After the termination of her relationship with Sridhar, she strikes a new relationship with Ranbir Roy, an Indian reporter in The Washington Times. Ranbir Roy is a married man, who gives her the ability to believe in her own creativity. As he tells her, “put yourself on the line. Find out what
you're all about. I think you've got the stuff in you.”(SE 276) Most significantly, he suggests her that she should create a work of fiction out of her own life. Karuna now writes a book named ‘Urban Woman in India’ keeping herself as the central character. The book turns out to be a best seller. It is the simultaneous realization of identity and creativity in Karuna that she discovers herself through her novel. In Socialite Evenings, the woman succeeds, and finds fulfillment and self satisfaction in a creative occupation.

Shobha displays the first signs of revolt by woman against the patriarchal system, and a protest against the institution of marriage and family in Socialite Evenings in which the three main female characters symbolize the absolute freedom of womanhood from all kind of patriarchal restrains. The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom, with no notion of marital fidelity. (Chandra Subhash 143) The value of the family and marriage is undermined and the traditional concept of marriage with fidelity as its cardinal principle stands discarded. (143)

Starry Nights, Shobha De’s second novel is considered to be her "most controversial and sensational novel"(Dash Sandhya Rani 167), because of its frank and candid expression of love and lust. In this novel she stepped out of the threshold of family and tradition to portray the harsh realities that await a woman outside the four walls of her house. It is a pulsating account of the survival and success of a woman in the ruthless world of Hindi films. The central character in the novel Asha Rani is a ravishingly beautiful film star, "with an insatiable libido, thus susceptible to indiscriminate sex with film people-producers, directors, heroes, cameramen, high society celebrities and other non filmy people also-everywhere used, soiled and exploited.”(167)

In her childhood she suffers the agony of unsuccessful relationship of her parents. Her father a renowned film producer in Madras leaves her mother and two daughters for a younger dancer. The girls with their unaffectionate and unscrupulous mother find themselves deprived of emotional security in childhood. Her mother had to prostitute in order to support her family and lived with her daughters in the slums. It is only by selling her flesh that her mother could pay for Aasha’s dancing classes. The family has to suffer deprivation and poverty, and in order to survive, her mother pushes her into the under-world of blue films. "Asha Rani’s first lesson in exploitation begins with her scheming mother who, for the sake
of money, uses her fifteen-year old daughter, forcing her to sleep with producers and distributors”. (167) For the hungry people of the film world, it is the forty inch bust of this fifteen year old girl which becomes the centre of attraction.

Aasha Rani’s irresistible sexual desire is not inherent but the manifestation of a suppressed sense of vengeance of the male world which has its roots in the ill-treatment of her Amma by her Appa, or it is because of her own exploitation by the male world since her childhood.

Perhaps it had something to do with appa and the way he’d mistreated her mother. Or maybe she felt soiled, used, exploited by men - She often told Kishanbhai bitterly: “All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all- beat you at your own game.(SN 8)This hatred has even a deeper root. Aasha Rani recollects the nightmarish experience of her childhood when she was sexually assaulted by her uncle:

   She remembered queuing up outside the enormous –tent with this man holding her hand. Soon her hand had been slyly slipped into his mundu.
   And his hand had been replaced by what felt like a firm hard stick. Aasha Rani wanted to scream, But she was terrified.... Finally, he had turned limp and she had felt her small hand go damp with something sticky and smelly. (SN.196)

In this first part of the novel i.e. Aasha Rani’s childhood; the author so realistically portrays how important a family is in the proper upbringing of a child. The security, affection, and love that a child gets from its parents, it cannot get from others. In a broken family not only are the children deprived of their happiness, they are even likely to be exploited by their close relatives. Everybody takes advantage of them.

As a child her name was Viji. It was Kishan Bhai, a small Film distributor who gave her the new name Aasha Rani. He also gave her, her first break in a Hindi movie. He was the first person to physically exploit her, and who taught her for the first time how to “part her legs”. Her mother acts as her pimp procuring film assignments and important roles for her, by compelling her to sleep with big personalities of the film industry. Thus the long agonizing
story of Aasha Rani begins, with her seduction and exploitation by the sex starved men of the so called glamour world. Her physical exploitation begins with Kishan Bhai but her mental agony has a regressive link with her past – the innocent days of her childhood, when her Amma was facing a lot of hardship to rear up her children, as her appa never turned to look at them, the days that passed in utter deprivation.

Beautiful, with charming looks and a perfect and appealing figure, Asha Rani makes a commendable progress in her profession, and becomes the top selling actress of her times, a top class star, 'the dream girl of millions'.(14) This is when she falls madly in love with the reigning top star of Hindi cinema-Akshaya Arora. Akashya Arora is a tactful, cunning and highly ambitious actor who has earned a respectful place for himself in the industry. His detractors call him "a mean, spiteful bastard who had symbolically fucked his way to the top."(38) Akashya Arora’s graceful personality, successful career and popularity with audience cast a deep impression in the innocent mind of Aasha Rani. Akashya Arora evinces interest on Aasha Rani because she is a ‘pricy hit’ when some of Akashya Arora’s movies are licking floor. He thinks, “this was a surefire way for him to hold on to his niche at the top and it involved Asha Rani.”(39) But she looked at him “with the besotted eyes of a woman; without realizing the mystery of his magic which had charmed every woman.”(39) Later in her life she realizes that it all began as an infatuation towards him. It was his top position in the industry, his aristocratic manners, high standard of living that swept her off her feet. She admits, “I feel like a villager in his presence.”(130) She is so impressed by the life-style of this man that she begins to emulate him, his manners and his accent in order to appear modern and sophisticated. Unfortunately, Akshaya Arora is a married man, and belongs to a very conservative and reputed family. He is a typical representative of the patriarchal society and lacks the courage and determination to go against the rules and regulations of the society. His wife Malini, once a popular gazal singer, completely devoted and dedicated to her star husband, gave up her flourishing carrier in order to take care of their family and children. Shobha De presents Malini as a traditional Indian wife, who is very possessive about her husband and cannot share him with anyone. On the other hand Akshaya Arora clandestinely shares his bed with Asha Rani, who is so infatuated with him that she feels no remorse in performing oral sex to him. Malini who is repulsive for sex, could never enjoy the consummation of sex with her husband. Malini somehow wants to get Aasha Rani out their
life; for this she arranges a meeting with her in a friend Rita’s house. Here Malini humiliates and rebukes Aasha Rani. She curses her to die a spinster. Malini lashes out outrageously at Asha Rani, showing her wifely jealousy and possession.

Malini screamed, ‘SEX! That is all you have –SEX! That is what women like you use. Cheap bitches- part your legs and let any man in. Sex, sex, sex, dirty, filthy sex! Perverts! You must be a pervert. What do you do to him- hah? Suck his cock? Or suffocate him with your breasts...eventually a man needs his wife and children.’(49)

Aasha Rani maintains her composure and coolly takes all this in her stride and in a revealing manner answers all her misgivings: “Let me show you your face, Malini. Just look at the hatred in your eyes. Is this how you greet your husband when he comes to you every night? And you wonder why he comes to me?”(49) hence she insinuates that a sense of crucifixion in bed is repulsive to her husband. Denied this pleasure, he turns to the Aasha Rani’s of the society. Malini continues to negate and repress her sexuality and becomes a frigid body in bed. Akshay has to turn to Aasha Rani for sexual gratification. Shobha De, through the medium of Rita, tries to find a solution for such distressed and betrayed wives like Malini. Rita is a pragmatic wife who pleads for a compromise in the marital relationship. To her, romance in marriage is a figment of imagination as it “finishes the morning after the wedding night.”(50) After that follows a painfully protracted period of boredom for women because husbands or men like “variety.”(50) Rita understands Malini’s predicament but sees nothing unusual in it. Shobha De in the following words of Rita seems to sum up her indictment of hollowness and hypocrisy inherent in Indian marriage-

Most women hate their husbands- it’s a fact. They hate marriage. That’s also a fact. But what else they can do? What is the choice? The only way to make a marriage work is through sex- and most women hate that too. But the day a man feels that his woman has lost interest in sex, and therefore in him, the relationship is finished and he starts looking elsewhere. Aasha Rani and her likes are always waiting. (50)
Rita reiterates the feminist fears that a wife has to pretend in this pharisaical and conservative patriarchal order. In her desperate yet revelatory advice to Malini, she says “shut your eyes and part your legs, whether you feel like it or not. Because, if you don’t some other woman will”. (50) Here lies the biggest discriminatory dilemma faced by women in India.

“A wife is acting all time, this is the world’s best-kept secret……Everything is decided by the bed; on the bed. No women should be foolish enough to be honest with her husband where sex is concerned.” (50)

Shobha de with these bold views on marriage and sex seems to drive the last nail in the coffin of the age old institution of marriage and patriarchy.

Aasha’s love for Akshaya is from the depth of her heart. Akshaya begins to feel Aasha’s presence in his life possessive and embarrassing. He fears her true love and passion for him, so he tries to avoid her. He even manipulates to get rid of her somehow. Their relations become so traumatic that Akshaya does not invite her to the Mahurat of his new movie. But unmindful of the consequences, Aasha Rani arrives to the mahurat uninvited, where Akshaya Arora not only humiliates, but also beats her brutally. She does not retaliate or complain, she only asks for forgiveness.

Aasha Rani gets everything in her life- fame, luxury, comfort and opulence. But one thing she misses; one thing that no money can buy- genuine love. She has many friends in the industry, who share her bed, but no friend in true sense who could share her feelings and predicaments. The one man whom she loved from the bottom of her heart, and who reciprocated to her, could not own her because he does not have the courage to break the shackles of the society and traditions of the patriarchal society.

Shobha De describes realistically Aasha Rani's intense longing to become a wife and mother, as Aasha Rani, with her preposterous suggestions, makes entreaties to Akshay to marry her by adopting Islam. "We can both become Muslims! It's easy.... I'll be your legally wedded second wife. Muslims can have four, but you'd better stop with me." (108) But Akshay refuses to change his religion and faith for a woman. So deep and strong is her resolve to marry Akshaya that she is ready to sacrifice her carrier, her image, fame, religion;
“subkuch” for him. To Seth Amir Chand she confesses: “You don’t understand Sethji, I love this man. I really do. I want to marry him. Bear his child.”(105) Ironically, while she can have sex with Akshaya at will anytime, she can’t marry him. De wants to convey the message that marriages are a means of the perpetuation of the patriarchal order. A woman’s self respect and identity is annihilated on the altar of marriage. De seems to believe that a marriage is but a futile exercise undertaken by two partners to realize each other fully.

The Indian woman in spite of her economic independence does not feel secure without the protection of men. Passionate Aasha too, deprived of Akshaya’s love, craves for protection which she expected from him. Unable to find this protection, she recollects her childhood and longs to relive a seven-year old child in the lap of Amma who rubbed coconut oil into her scalp. She wants to cry as a child. Lost in the pleasant memories of Akshaya, Aasha thinks she cannot forget Akshaya and the lovely days spent with him. Boredom and loneliness in life do not inspire Aasha to work hard in three shifts. Physically and emotionally drained, she feels tired. Her heart craves for a normal life. Normal persons to her are those, who live outside the film world. Her heart craves for marriage and parenthood. Frustrated, betrayed and humiliated she tries to commit suicide, but fortunately escapes death. Aasha Rani’s journalist friend Linda who knows all her secrets betrays her by revealing her secrets in the media, which comes as a terrible blow to her. Linda a journalist in a film magazine is an important character in the novel as well as in the life and career of Aasha Rani. She is a fast and cunning woman, who knows well the tricks of her trade. By her frankness and extrovert personality, she succeeds in intimidating Aasha Rani. It is she who initiates her in the mysteries and pleasures of lesbianism. In Aasha Rani’s declining phase, particularly after her return from New Zealand, Linda reveals her story in the leading film magazines there by making public all secrets of her life, which she knew since during the peak of Aasha Rani’s career she was her intimate friend.

The novel describes almost every kind of sexual behavior, masturbation, oral sex, sodomy, homosexuality and lesbianism. The novel also suggests that in many ways lesbianism is superior to hetero-sexual relationship. Aasha enjoys her lesbian relations with Linda, as much as she enjoys her heterosexual encounters with men. In spite of such close
physical and emotional intimacy with Aasha Rani, Linda betrays her trust. She annihilates her reputation, and people start seeing her as a family destroyer.

In one mahurat party, Aasha Rani meets Abhijeet Mehra the only son of an influential producer and industrialist Ambrish Mehra. Betrayed by Akashya Arora, Aasha Rani reluctantly tries to find peace in her relationship with Abhijeet Mehra. Abhijeet’s interest in her in spite of his beautiful fiancée Nikita whom he marries latter on, fills Aasha Rani with further remorse. After going through Nikita’s interview in a magazine about her husband, Aasha Rani feels like the courtesan Chandramukhi of Devdas. She feels tortured by Abhijeet, who comes to her only for sex, and has no love for her. Her relationship with Abhijeet makes her feel as if she is nothing but just a sexy Madrasi girl, a celebrity fuck. She tells Abhijeet, “You are not making love to me. You are screwing my own image on screen. Get out of here, Abhijeet. Go back to your wife. Make a man of yourself. (233)

Aasha’s affair with Abhijeet is of very little consequence because like her other lovers, he is also a married man. Bored, frustrated and desolate Aasha, wants to go out of Bombay desperately. Abhijeet offers her a holiday in a distant land where nobody could recognize them. So they zero in on New Zealand. But as always, ill-fate once again dogs Aasha Rani; Abhijeet’s father, somehow comes to know about their amorous relations, and finds out their destination. As their plane lands in New Zealand, his father surprises them by his presence in the airport. He admonishes Aasha Rani, and offers her a huge amount to leave his son. Aasha Rani accepts the offer with alacrity, as she has no emotional attachment with Abhijeet. Abhijeet docilely follows his father back to India.

Aasha Rani is once again left alone, but this time in a lonely country where she is a complete stranger. Once while she was sitting in a disco, she is taken aback, when she is accosted by a young man, who recognizes her in an obscure country. The young man, Jamie Phillips, while in London, had a girlfriend, who served as an airhostess in the Indian Airlines. She was a big fan of Aasha Rani. With her, Jamie had seen all of Aasha Rani’s movies several times. Jamie’s grand father had served in India during the British period. He therefore has a liking for India and a sense of admiration for Indians. When Jamie proposes her for marriage, she readily accepts it. In this way, at the peak of her career, Aasha Rani takes the decision to marry a foreigner and settle in Wellington. She becomes Mrs. Jamie (Jay) Phillips,
the wife of a farmer, leading a simple, contended, and peaceful life in an obscure country away from the glamour and glitz of movies. After one and a half year she gives birth to a girl child. Her life is filled with love and joy. Jay proves to be a dotting husband and an affectionate father. She promises to her husband, “You are a good man. And I promise you, I’ll be a good mother to Sasha.” (278) Happy with her present state of life; Aasha Rani tries to forget her past, and does not want to think about India. The advent of Shasha – her daughter in her life, fills her life with new charm and happiness. She feels herself on cloud nine. She decides that she will share the mutual trust and understanding; the most beautiful aspects of a mother-daughter relationship with her daughter Sasha. Aasha Rani feels herself fortunate to have such an understanding husband. Her beautiful daughter Sasha has unique beauty owing to her mixed blood. The marriage however is not whole some identification with one another, but more of a compromise, as Jay’s family has not accepted Aasha Rani wholeheartedly. They continue to ignore and embarrass her for her color. Her lecherous father-in-law even tries to harass her sexually.

Aasha Rani lives in New Zealand for five years, perfectly happy with her husband and daughter. This is when her husband suggests her that she should at least once visit India with her daughter. Aasha Rani is reluctant to go back to India. The idea of going back home is utterly abhorrent to her. The thought of meeting her evil mother shatters her, “Nothing doing, no way. I never want to go back and please don’t give Amma the news. I want to protect Sasha from her. I want to bring her up with all the love in the world. I never want her to meet her grandmother. Never.” (276)

Despite her hatred and bitterness for her people in India, Jay succeeds to persuade her to visit India around Holi. On their way to India via London Aasha is greeted and felicitated by the NRI community. Her visit to London reminds her of her previous visit five years ago when she was the up and coming supernova on the scene with three major hits running simultaneously.” (278) After five years of solitude and anonymous life, she once again tastes the blood of popularity. This sudden attention reawakens the stardom in her. It reminds her of being the ‘Sweetheart of Millions’. On reaching India she finds herself in totally strange circumstances and feels a kind of responsibility towards her ailing Appa who is back home, and wants to own up the family he had once deserted. Besides Amma has become old,
suffering from joint pains and hypertension. Amma has lost her dictators image and totally depends upon the mercy of Sudha, her younger daughter, who has skillfully taken Aasha’s place in Bombay cinema. Aasha Rani’s homecoming after five years marks a drastic change in her fortune. By then her younger sister has emerged as a big star and people have not yet forgotten Aasha Rani. Watching the enthusiasm of the people and her popularity Jay suggests her, a comeback. He realizes that Aasha Rani cannot stay in New Zealand for ever leaving behind her own country. Aasha Rani now prefers to stay back in India, to regain her lost glory in Indian cinema. She finds herself at a criss-cross of her life when her ailing father needs her support but her daughter does not want to stay in India. Jay and Sasha return to Wellington, leaving her back to fulfill her wishes, her responsibilities towards her family. Aasha gets a shock when she is offered the roles of mother or mother-in-law only. In order to get main roles in movies, she has adulterous relationship with the young producer Jojo. Jojo’s wife somehow comes to know about it and abuses her in public. Unhappy incidents occur in her life one after another, breaking her down completely. The most shocking of these is Akshay’s untimely death. In the meantime, she receives a call from Wellington from her daughter that Jay is having an affair with her nanny. Shasha tells her crying over the phone that she misses her mother as her father spends most of his time with Nanny. Afraid of failure and rejection she decides to find out the reality with Jay. Her trip to New Zealand lands her in further remorse. In Sasha’s birthday party, when she wears a saree that her daughter doesn’t like Sasha screams and yells on the top of voice at her and clings to Nanny: “Don’t touch me, I am not your daughter. I don’t want to be your daughter.” On reaching Wellington she comes to know that her marriage is over. Jay tells her about her affair with Alice: “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’ve grown apart”.

Confused and desperate with a broken heart she feels shattered. ‘Whichever way one looked at,’ she thinks ‘there is always a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and discarding a woman.’(245) She does not want to return to her family in Madras. Her unpromising state of mind makes her land in London and search for a job. She feels utterly lonely living the life of an exile in London. She meets Sonali, a high class call girl of London’s political and upper class society. She finds herself trapped in the web of Tamilian terrorists. Somehow she manages to escape from their clutches and returns to Madras, back to her family. Her younger
sister’s failure in her endeavor to make name for herself, disturbs her. Appa’s faith in her gives her strength and courage to restart their old family studio in Madras. She begins her work with renewed vigor.

Marriage is not regarded as essential in the fictional world of Shobha De. In Sultry Days, Deb says: “Who knows about marriage-sharriage… I am happy as I am.” (45) That he never marries Nisha even after having a prolonged affair with her, eloquently testifies to his belief in the irrelevance of the institution of marriage. When he does agree to marry Nisha, it is out of practical considerations of his “dal-roti, a warm bed, twice a week maalish and a daily screw.” (56) There is also a reference in the novel to “typical Bombay marriage” in which “she goes her way and he goes his.” (40) Such marriages do not last long. The incompatibility of the partners may be the chief reason of their dissolution. As one of the women in Snapshots confides, “we tried it. But he wanted to walk counter clockwise. And I prefer clockwise… We both wanted to go in different direction.” (36) Constancy and faithfulness in married life are just unthinkable in the case of such people. Reema’s point of view in Snapshots, represents the opinion of the majority, when she remarks “Imagine not knowing any other body, any other feeling, any other sensation. Forever. Sounds terrible.” (28)

Modern urban Indian woman is quite carefully and objectively portrayed in the novels of Shobha De. This new Indian woman is all set to defy the orthodox morality and the stale tradition of the rigid sex-role assigned to her according to Hindu scriptures that marriage is a sacrament. It marks a point of maturity in the life of a woman, signifying the flowering of life. However the institution of marriage is losing its foothold particularly on account of growing economic independence of women. The restless spirit of new Indian woman acts as a potent source of increasing cases of divorce and sexual perversion, irrespective of social status. Modern urban woman is absorbed in her new found utopia.

Traditionally, authority was vested in the husband and the ties that bound marriage and family together were typically based on duty and economic necessity. Today marriage is likely to be viewed as a mutual undertaking for achieving an intimate and mutually need fulfilling relationship with another person- a person, with whom to share all aspects of one’s life. However, to learn to share intimate experiences, to give and receive
affection and emotional support, and to establish a secure “home base” in our changing and uncertain world is a difficult undertaking. (APML1988, 170)

Second Thoughts, Shobha De’s seventh novel is a departure from her earlier novels. She has evolved as a sensitive writer with this novel. In this novel she delves deep into the psyche of its characters, probes their motivations and feeling. Second thought deals with a middle class Bengali girl Maya, born and bred in Calcutta, who makes an arranged matrimony alliance with Ranjan, a Bombay based, foreign returned Bengali boy. Maya, the young beautiful bride, who is very fascinated with Bombay, and very proud that she is married to a foreign educated boy, soon discovers herself in disillusionment. She finds that her husband, despite his stay in U.S.A, and his convent educational background is a narrow minded, insensitive, dominating and traditional man, who makes her a prisoner in his house. The agony of Maya, who finds herself trapped in a dull and uneventful matrimony, is the theme of the novel.

Marriage ushers glamour, fascination and freedom for most young girls, but once the ceremony is over the dreams come crashing down and it is with a lot of bitterness that they face the harsher unknown realities. Maya was fascinated by Bombay but was taken aback when she sensed that “Bombay smelt of desperation and deceit.”(3) When she met Ranjan, she was more excited at the prospect of settling in Bombay- the city of her dreams. “Marrying Ranjan would make her a part of it immediately – Maya knew she’d be bonded with Bombay forever.” But little did she know that desperation and deceit would become the key words of her life when she becomes a part of Bombay. It is in desperation that she deceives her husband, just a few years after her marriage.

At the first meeting with Ranjan and his mother Mrs. Malik, Maya is tutored on the expectations of the Malik family very explicitly. During the conversation, when Chitra, Maya’s mother drops a hint that her daughter is eager to pursue a career later in life, Mrs. Malik’s expression is such that it becomes evident that she does not approve of working women. Ranjan approves his mother’s statement and declares: “I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman’s duty to run a good home.”(5) He then turns to Maya and asks her in a challenging voice if she agrees with him. Maya is taken off
guard and before she can say anything her uncle intervenes, “In any Indian family, the husband’s comforts always come first. Everything else follows.” Later on their way back home, Chitra consoles Maya by saying that the issue of taking up a job can be sorted out later. “Let them first say, ‘yes’. Then we can bring it up.” (13)

Shobha De’s novels are a slice of urban life. They deal with contemporary issues. Second Thoughts is a realistic representation of the psyche of the traditional Indian men and women. Although they claim to be proud products of the twenty-first century, but deep down they still cherish and nourish the age-old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of men and women has hardly undergone any change. As individuals, they may have progressed but in the institution of marriage, the man is still the lord and a woman has to abide to his whims and fancies, whether she likes it or not. The same mental culture can be seen in Second Thoughts. Ranjan is a modern man, has studied abroad, and lived in Bombay, but as far as his wife is concerned he imposes restrictions on her movements. She is not free to go anywhere in the city. She cannot feel free to live in the house in her own way. The STD facility on the phone is locked for her. Shobha De captures the middle class psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan – his attitude to hold on tightly to the purse strings so as to keep a control over his wife, his lectures on wifely duties, and his complete control on the use of the air-conditioner.

Both Maya and Ranjan are strongly influenced by the traditional orthodoxy of their respective parents. Mrs Malik is rich and apparently seems quite modern and smart. Ranjan too has been brought up in a modern city, yet when it comes to making the choice of a bride, he agrees for an arranged marriage. Mrs. Malik too has a very clear picture of her future daughter-in-law. Maya is often hurt by Ranjan’s attitude and wonders why he did not pick up a Bengali girl from Bombay. Mrs. Malik was an influential lady and she could have chosen for her son a girl born and brought up in Bombay. Once Maya had spoken to Ranjan on this issue and he had sharply replied: “Oh no, no. These Bombay Bengalis are different, they’ve lost their cultural identity; their roots are not in our tradition. My mother wouldn’t have been able to adjust to someone like that.”(115-116) And when Maya wants to know about his choice, he says he had left it all to his mother. Whenever Ranjan speaks about Maya’s parents, it is sans respect. The sarcastic tone and contempt is evidently a trait he has inherited.
from his mother. Maya knows that Ranjan can dare to speak in such a manner because he feels superior in some way to her and her background. It leaves Maya hurt and hot tears well up in her eyes. She clearly remembers Mrs. Malik comment once, “If you ask me, it's always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background… 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 selecting the right candidate for Ranjan.”(231)

A careful study of Chitra, Maya’s mother, reveals the traditional outlook of a girl’s mother in Indian society, particularly the middle class. Maya is keen to complete her studies but Chitra realizes that a foreign returned boy, available for only two weeks, would get “snapped before you and I blinked our eyes.”(3) She is acutely worried about Maya’s slightly dark complexion. It is a cause of great concern to her. She chooses a yellow saree (a colour that Maya hates) so that it makes her look fairer. She knows that the Maliks are very fair and as is the general Indian attitude, they certainly would not like a dark complexioned daughter-in-law. When Mrs. Malik lays down the rules and explains tersely that girls can only be moulded if they stop thinking of their parent’s home as their own, Chitra agrees with her without any qualms. She seems to understand this very well as can be seen by the following comment, “I believe in the same thing myself. A girl has to cut the cord of her family quickly and identify with her in-laws. The sooner she does this, the better.”(222)

Chitra issues the standard instructions to Maya that marriage involves sacrifice which has to be undertaken by the woman. Maya reflects much on this later and feels that probably her mother had uttered these words: “Perhaps she was pointing to the disaster of her own marriage and telling me how I could avoid the same pitfalls.” (64) Thus, in the minds of Maya and Ranjan the specific, set rules were entrenched much before they got married. It is the pressure of this deep rooted system of thinking on the one hand and the exposure to the modern system of education, the influence of the contemporary social trends in their peer group, on the other, that they both find it difficult to maintain an equilibrium.

Ranjan is not able to relate with Maya because of his mother’s over-indulgence in their personal married life. Ranjan does not resent her interference. On the contrary he is too
eager to discuss his domestic matters with her as a religious routine. He is in the awe of his mother. On their first meeting, Chitra observes that Ranjan is a very dutiful and loving son. It is true, he is only that. He fails to be a dutiful and loving husband. Duty not only means to provide food, home and money, it also includes a certain amount of respect and affection for one’s spouse. She has no sex-life at all with Ranjan. Sex is a “complicated issue” (257) in their married life. “Their clumsy-sex honeymoon at a depressing hotel in Mahabaleshwar”(48) points clearly that their initial experience was unsatisfactory. Maya feels that perhaps she was too inhibited or too uptight. Later she discovers to her surprise that “it was Ranjan who was all that.”(48)Ranjan has a genuine lack of interest in Maya. With coldness in this respect as well, Maya is worried about her non-pregnancy. She is quite sure that if Ranjan continues to maintain stiffness in sex affairs, she would in all probability be childless. She more or less reconciles herself to the fact that she would never bear children. This is a sensitive issue. Failure in this aggravates her sense of loneliness. Their relationship is not only a failure at the sexual level but even otherwise their temperaments are different and they lack compatibility. Their marriage is only one year old but monotony heavily erodes it. With Ranjan’s non-communicative attitude, Maya sulks in the kitchen. That is the only place in the house which had become symbolic of her refuse. They never do anything together, be it an outing, watch popular hit comedies, go to eating places or to the beaches. While a lot of exciting things take place around Maya, Ranjan is immersed in the evening newspaper. It leaves Maya longing. “If only he’d be more enthusiastic about sharing his city with me.”(40) It troubles her to see that Ranjan refuses to share a single aspect of his life with her. Whether it is the excitement of the first monsoon shower or the tingling spell of slightly wintery weather, it fails to arouse Ranjan. Maya’s excitement and high spirits on such occasions look ridiculous to Ranjan. He brings down her elevated spirits by sharply rebuking, “Why can’t you be still. You know? Just still. You are always so restless. It’s so tiring to watch. (39)”

Ranjan only speaks to her about economizing on family budget and minutely goes over the weekly budget. Often in the course of such lectures, he asks Maya to learn something from his mother and follow her. Ranjan loves Maya only as one would love a pet in the house. Even when Ranjan reaches out for Maya, it was a gesture devoid of any passion: “An impersonal friendly sort of gesture which always left me feeling like a well-trained dog being
rewarded for his good behavior.” (25) Their life in the bedroom is settled in a routine— they could have been brothers or sisters or flatmates. Occasionally she does get a brotherly peck from Ranjan. She is happy with the physical demonstration of affection by Ranjan. She enjoys being held, stroked and kissed but she also knows that, “this wasn’t at all what married life was meant to be.” (25) When Ranjan returns from Calcutta after ten days, Maya shyly snuggles up to him and caresses him but, he just jumps back, “as though he had received an electric shock. He had lain trembling in bed for a long time, his breathing heavy, his eyes screwed shut.” (259) As a dismayed and lonely, Maya puts her head wearily on the pillow, Ranjan starts snoring—not at all aware of the pain he has caused to Maya.

Maya’s tragedy is that she is treated like a figure made of ‘alabaster’ and not of ‘flesh and blood’ before marriage by her mother and after marriage by her husband. When she was small, her mother made her conscious of her nakedness and changing contours. On reaching puberty, her mother had slapped her forehead to show as if ‘a catastrophe’ had descended. And after this event her parents stopped ‘hugging or caressing her.’ (45) Then one day her mother had told Maya that she had become a ‘young lady’ and that she should not allow anybody to come close to her, or ‘be touched anywhere.’ (46) Maya heard her mother saying: ‘I have no worry where Maya is concerned. She is not like other girls. She is very pure and unspoiled.’ (46) But then Maya wondered whether she was really so. She had had times when she had felt stirring between her legs and squeezed pillow held by her knees to suppress the urge. After marriage her husband expected her to be content with a decent house, four square meals, enough money and plenty of time to loll on the bed.” (262-263) As for sex, Ranjan did not consider it ‘important to anybody.’ According to him if one’s mind is busy and one keeps oneself active, there cannot be time ‘to worry about sex.’ (257) He wants Maya to be busy with other things and forget sex. He considers eating, sleeping, doing office duties, attending social obligations, etc., enough for a successful life. On the other hand, Maya strongly feels ‘missing something’ without exactly knowing ‘what that something was’. (258) However, the fact remains that this ‘something’ is that she had ‘no sex life at all,’ (259) ‘had never experienced an orgasm,’ and had realized that she would ‘never bear children.’ (257) Whenever she is in a lovemaking mood, he asks her to wait and says: ‘I am not ready yet Maya… You will have to be patient. It is going to take time. I can’t. I just can’t.’ On one occasion, when she decides to take initiative and try her luck with him; she tries to snuggle up to him and caress him, as they
lay in the bed. But then Ranjan recoils- jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He kept trembling in bed for a long time breathing heavily and asked her to ‘stop behaving like a cheap woman. A prostitute.’ (259) To Ranjan such a love-making mood is ‘a very negative attitude,’ a matter of ‘big laugh’, a sort of ‘nonsense.’ Then there are nights, when Ranjan enjoys ‘deep sleep’ while she ‘lay awake wondering how to induce sleep as a lack of physical exercise combined with mental lethargy had dulled her senses.’ (260)

Perhaps she would have overcome the sex factor if she had been satisfied in other respects. On the contrary, Ranjan pooh-poohs even her genuine suggestions and problems. For instance, once she asks Ranjan why they cannot go out together at least on weekends, so that she could ‘explore Bombay.’ At this Ranjan snubs her, labeling such a demand as childish and admonishes her that life is not a picnic and that a married woman should learn ‘to deal with responsibilities.’ (27) On another occasion, she suggests to have a part-time ‘good cook so that she can find a job’ as she has a degree in textile designing.’ (28) Ranjan totally turns down this proposal, telling her that Bombay is like London and New York, as he points to the lurking dangers for a working woman; and above all ‘Mummy won’t like it.’ (260)

When Nikhil Verma comes into her life, he brings a new meaning of existence for her. Her dreams and desires once again surface and she suddenly sees the spectacular rainbow stretch across the sky. Maya wants to express her joy and happiness. She wants to be free, alive, reckless and go mad with joy. Nikhil is the fourth floor neighbour’s son. He is a collegiate student junior to Maya by 5-6 years. He seems less interested in college lectures and studies, but very adept in fishing up females. In the very first meeting Maya can see ‘his body language to be different’ (16) and the appearance that of ‘a warrior leading a victory parade.’ (17) In the very first encounter ‘he looked straight into Maya’s eyes and smiled’(18). Nikhil before proceeding ahead, gets it confirmed that he is getting a green signal from Maya by putting up this question to Maya: ‘Should I call you didi?’ and the moment Maya tells her that he can call her whatever he felt comfortable with, Nikhil can see the path open, destination clear and no competition as such. He starts his moves slowly but steadily in the desired direction. As for Maya, she finds herself painfully aware of her divided state: “But Nikhil most definitely affected me and one part of me did not ‘approve.’ This was ridiculous – a newlywed woman day dreaming about a neighbour’s son. Disgusting, and shameful.” (32) But then Nikhil’s well-planned efforts and tricks, Ranjan’s continued self-
centered thoughts and actions, and Maya’s unfulfilled genuine needs finally make Maya give in to Nikhil’s net.

Nikhil’s first trick is to offer a cassette of his songs to Maya requesting her to allow him to listen to it on her cassette player. Initially Maya doesn’t entertain this request, but on knowing that it contains songs about her, she gets pleased and agrees ‘to listen to it later…tomorrow.’(75) Maya who was constantly neglected, humiliated and hurt, now for the first time finds herself being praised and honored as the song in the cassette is about her. The thought that somebody bothered for her, saw some good in her, stirs her greatly. Later she does listen to the cassette, likes it, and even conveys it to Nikhil: ‘I loved your song.’(76)

One day Nikhil spots Maya outside the building and grabs the opportunity by making an offer, ‘come on,’ ‘I will treat you to some …’(90)Maya tells him that her husband would not like it and so she cannot accompany him. He finally manages to enter her house with her and proposes to help her by doing her household work as he has ‘no problem about washing, cleaning, dusting, polishing.’(109)Maya requests him to go as it was not proper for a young man to be alone like this with a married woman.’(110)On another occasion he phones Maya and extends his offer to help her. Noting her nervous state, he tells her that there is no point in suffering silently and that she should ‘come of it. Act real. Get real.’(105) The phone talk works and she collects courage to tell him that she would like to talk to him again.(106)

Nikhil’s first big break through occurs when her husband is away on ‘a five star ten day official trip. In the absence of Ranjan, Maya ‘experienced a strange emptiness.’(160)But at the same time, instead of missing him, she has relief and feels free of pressure, approval seeking, being judged, watched, corrected, scolded, nagged pulled, instructed.(163)She wonders what she was doing there in a city that was not her own and with a man for whom she didn’t feel very much except ‘a feeble affection.” A long inward debate continues, pushing her in a ‘slough of despair.’(164) Against this background, one morning Nikhil drops in and proposes for ‘a ride’: ‘Let us get out of here. Come on. Be daring. Do something spontaneous for once in life.’ (170)

Maya makes it clear, ‘listen Nikhil… whether it is in Calcutta or Bombay, a married woman is not supposed to meet other men. That is all.’(169)Nikhil coolly argues that he is simply a friend and he has come and proposed her for a ride simply because he genuinely likes her and he has liked her since the day they first met.(171)He darts argument after
argument and stirs her self-confidence. In these moments, Maya seriously screens her marriage, her decision to move to Bombay, her cowardice at not asserting herself vis-à-vis Ranjan, her giving up a career, etc. And after a prolonged inward talk, she agrees for the ride. He takes her to Malabar Hills, then to Naaz Café, Marine Drive, etc. Nikhil does not forget to use the weapon of flattery. In the hotel, he says: ‘that is nice. You are smiling with your eyes. It suits you, Maya…You are beautiful. Believe it.’ (175) Through his soft, slow, skilful, well-calculated measures, Nikhil succeeds in carving a niche in Maya’s heart.

On another morning, Nikhil calls on her and proposes for a movie, but Maya turns it down. (197) However, here again she refuses to go not because she did not want to but because she was afraid of ‘neighbors, servants and watchmen.’ (198) Nikhil’s efforts finally bear fruit when one morning he calls on Maya with flowers announcing his birthday. And then without giving any time for thinking or reaction, he pulls her into his embrace and stops not till he accomplishes the act of love making ‘painlessly, smoothly, gently.’ (270) Of course, even in the process of love making, Maya remains conscious of the guilt, an inevitable result of tradition and culture. She keeps her eyes shut to be free from ‘any responsibility’ of the act or prove her ‘innocence’ later. (169) After the act of love making, Maya becomes cunning and tricky. This is evident when Ranjan asks about the flowers. Maya tells him that, she had brought the flowers for his mother. The novel is a testimony that Shobha De’s maturity, insightfulness, alertness and ambivalence have reached new heights with the passage of time. The novel has been successful in projecting the psyche of an Indian married woman who is caught and crushed between the wheels of culture and free will.

Mikki the protagonist of Shobha De’s third novel Sisters is determined to save her father’s industries from going bankrupt. She is aware that “there are enough vultures waiting to pounce upon” her (11) Mikki goes in for a middle-aged business man, Binny Malhotra. Despite being warned by Ramankaka, her father’s close confidant and the Manager of her industries, Mikki decides to marry Binny. She is attracted to his uncanny aggressive manners. Even her close friend and old hand, Amy, supports her decision: “May be he lacks finesse… refinements… nevertheless Malhotra type men are better… an older man… an experienced one. And together you’d make quite a team.” (58)
Unlike Shobha De’s other female characters who generally tend to free themselves from the clutches of married life, Mikki deliberately gets into wedlock. Though she has been enamoured of the life of freedom, she is not averse to being a wife. What she does not like is the inhuman subordination of the woman and her confinement to four walls of the kitchen. With her education in America and progressive thinking, Mikki gives in to Binny whom she loves endlessly. In the beginning, Binny appears to be all attention towards Mikki who “enjoyed his experienced approach and found herself discovering aspects of her own sexuality, she hadn’t guessed existed.” (58) In his company, she not only gets an insight into her real ‘self’ but also feels a sense of security. She prides herself on being his wife.

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, should give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her mind, and her soul. She was in love with him. And he was finally hers. (109)

It is this total submission, a characteristic of the traditional woman, which adds to the superiority of man and consequent exploitation of woman. However her honeymoon with Binny is to end in a fiasco. Binny, a womanizer has already got a family and his marriage with Mikki is intended to keep up his image in the society. Strongly enough, Mikki, having learnt this, remains silent, for she does not care for his past life. But she cannot tolerate his indifference to her. Except for a few moments when “he poured falcon of joy on her limbs” (108) her life with him became a veritable hell. The process of dehumanization of Mikki begins, when all her property is transferred to Binny. Besides, she is denied motherhood, for she has to keep always fit for him. Being a representative of the oppressive system Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active member both in life as well as business. He is categorically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife: “who stays at home and looks after me … our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfill their husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going.” (109) This distresses Mikki, but as she is aware of her precarious condition, she pleads to him: “I can look after you and look after at least a part of the business. We could work together… I won’t have to wait hours to see you.” (109)
Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. Although she fails to find in Binny a man with whom she could share her life, Mikki is willing to compromise her own life if it meant he’d notice her, listen to her, acknowledge her existence.” (140) but her dream of leading a happy life with Binny is shattered when he suspects her character, and turns her out of his house on moral grounds. She pleads innocence and makes entreaties to him: “ Binny… I love you. Only you… I can’t live without you.”

Her disillusion with Binny reaches its climax, when he divorces her. All her efforts to reconcile with Binny are unsuccessful. Mikki wants to retain her father’s industries but before she could take some action in this direction, by divine intervention Binny Malhotra meets a tragic end along with his mistress and children in a road accident. With the death of Binny, Miki once again regains her industries and palatial house that Binny had confiscated from her. Mikki is a changed woman now. Her dreadful experience with Binny gives her an insight into her ‘being’ as a woman and an individual. The transformation of Mikki from a social butterfly to a mature woman and to a kindly mother-figure is apparent when she turns her attention towards her estranged sister-Alisha.

Love is a major motivating factor for women in all her novels though it takes various forms; sometimes aggressive and destructive, like in Strange Obsession which has lesbianism as its theme) and at other times submissive, innocent and child-like (personified in the character of Maya in Second Thoughts). Her fiction often focuses on an exhausted generation of neglected wives who yearn for companionship and appreciation which invariably eludes them. As Rita, remarks sarcastically in Starry Nights, “We demand communication, attention … arey baba forget it. We should be happy if our husbands don’t beat us, burn us, torture us, insult us, discard us. That is all.”(252)

Interestingly, it’s not just bored and frustrated housewives, but also hardened and cynical women who are vulnerable to the eternal feminine fantasy of a partner for whom she would mean the world, Most of the times; however, De highlights the futility of this emotional surrender because of a man’s innate inability to reciprocate it. As Rashmi, a character in her novel Snapshots asks, “But was any man worth a woman’s love?”(76)
Thus the archetypal Indian male in Shobha De’s novels has been painted in the murkiest colours. She obviously believes that Indian women have changed qualitatively, are a part of the modern world, and ready for the new millennium. But the Indian male is still trapped by history and refusing to be shaken out of this torpor. This imbalance deals a major blow to the institution of marriage. Hitherto it provided for society’s need for love, security and children, but in the fictional world of Shobha De it is not regarded as essential. In her autobiography Selective Memories, Shobha De is very categorical about what Marriage meant to her:

“Marriage to me connotes commitment and surrender. Merging with, blending, overlapping, combining. It is a symbiotic relationship where one feeds on the other, depends on the other, needs the other.” (481)

Simultaneously Shobha De goes on to emphasize that eventually every Man-woman relationship is a power struggle either on or overt of subliminal level. Very often we find De exploring the difficulties that women face in balancing careers and marriage in a male dominated society, thus highlighting the economic aspects of this power play. She stresses that there can be no talk of independence for women without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind of free-spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else. Her novels emphasize the value of equivalence of power. A pertinent example is Starry Nights which is a feminist work of sorts. The Starlet is used and abused throughout, but in the final pages of the book, she her sister and her young daughter walk off into the sunset with self-respect and “an income to match.’(220) The ending once again brings out De’s emphatic statement. “The women in my books are definitely not doormats. They’re not willing to be kicked around.” (Ajay singh,12)

“Spouse: The Truth about Marriage” is a rich repository, a memoir of Shobha De’s life with her husband Dilip De, her children, her friends and those that touch her life via work. The book is as Shobha De states in the foreword, more anecdotal and far more entertaining than the drone of a psychiatrist merely churning out cases of marriages brought back from the brink of disaster.

Unlike the image that most Indians have of Shobha as being a man-hating feminist, her self-deprecating and brutal self-reflection on her own weaknesses that have been the
cause of a few minor skirmishes at home, show her to be a sensible, mature woman. While reading the memoir of her life together with her second husband one gets to understand what makes an enigmatic vivacious personality like Shobha De tick.

She even discusses her first marriage in a frank manner:

“Marriages disintegrate for various reasons. Sometimes they fall apart by default. As my first one did. May be we both entered it at a wrong time in our respective lives. Maybe we had not thought of the decision through. Maybe our expectations didn’t match. Maybe we grew in entirely different ways. May be I was to headstrong, a bit too impatient. So many years later, there is much regret about the sadness caused. (35)

In this book, Shobha De discusses about a whole gamut of things that can go wrong in a marriage- starting from skirmishes over finances, interpersonal relationships, lack of sex , lack of kids, affairs, jealousy, invasion of personal space, globalization etc. She believes in open communication , recognition of one’s own flaws, while compromising on those of one’s partner(i.e. if they are minor quirks and not vile habits like alcoholism, drugs, womanizing etc.) Most importantly, the book stresses the 3T theory that has been the foundation of any happy marriage- Time, Tenderness and Togetherness. Creativity, communication and being considerate to one’s spouse are the hallmarks of a happy married life. Spouse is a rich storehouse of tips and tricks and deals with a number of important issues on which she hands out sensible and practical advice.

“It takes minimum of ten years for two people to actually get to know one another. To intercept the little tricks, idiosyncrasies, quirks and accept. Ten more to understand what it all adds up to. Who the real person you are married to, actually is. Wht living together for twenty years has taught you- about yourself and your partner. And then, another ten to finally accept your differences and come to terms with the hiccups that might have bothered you earlier. That’s when you start to appreciate one another. Enjoy sameness and overlook the differences. Its a pretty long journey- thirty years. Are you up for it? (38)
Works Cited


