

Against economic subalternity in the novels of Shobha De

Richa¹, Gulab Singh²

¹Lecturer in English , GGSSS Bohar Rohtak, Haryana, (India)

²Professor, Department of English,
Maharshi Dayanand university Rohtak, Haryana, (India)

ABSTRACT

As a popular saying goes, man is born free but this is not true for woman. She is born free but is answerable to either her family or society while making important decisions. The plight of a married working woman is still distressing. With the arrival of feminism and changing attitude of society towards working woman, most husbands want their wives to work, but the woman is expected to perform household chores single handedly whereas the husband doesn't share responsibilities. Once children come into her life, challenges keep mounting, as she has to take up additional roles. Rearing her children and shaping them to become good human beings along with looking after the needs of her husband and in-laws as well as working outside, forces her to take up too many roles at the same time. The present paper shows this secondary status or subaltern status of women as is reflected in the novels of Shobha De.

Keywords: *subalternity, women, feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft thinks that women are particularly vulnerable to inequality and exploitation because they are too timid and submissive, lay greater emphasis on compromise rather than confrontation, adept themselves according to men, and follow them. This happens because they are economically dependent on men. In her semi-autobiographical novel *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* she describes her father, who was feckless, tyrannical, and contemptuous of women. She speaks sarcastically:

His orders were not to be disputed; and the whole house was expected to fly, at the word of command, as if to man the shrouds, or mount aloft in an elemental strife, big with life or death. He was to be instantaneously obeyed, especially by my mother, whom he very benevolently married for love: but took care to remind her of the obligation, when she dared, in the slightest instance, to question his absolute authority[1].

Wollstonecraft pitied her mother's sufferings. But she despised her as well—for her passivity, for her feminine sentimentality. Wollstonecraft has a feminist protest against what society imposes on women. She said femininity is something imposed on us by men; and the very concept is full of contradictions. She said woman is at once protected and deprived, idolized and despised. Told that she is a goddess or a queen, but treated like a domestic servant or, if she is unlucky, a slave and is being given subaltern status.

This is what Barbara Bergmann opines. He said, “Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine upheaval. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex” [2]. At this juncture, she doesn’t need to fight for equality or celebrate Women’s Day to prove that she is worthy enough. Rather she should be given more opportunities in diverse areas so that she is able to showcase her talent. She also needs a sensitive partner who is willing to share responsibilities around the house. It is essential for a woman to understand that by constantly comparing herself to a man, her ability to accomplish bigger goals in life will get weakened. She must realize that if she chooses to conquer the world, then nobody can stop her from doing so.

II.DISCUSSION

In Shobha De’s *Snapshots* Aparna is a career oriented working woman yet she has to perform not only household duties along with her outside productive work but she has to bear bullying of her husband also. De writes in *Snapshots*:

Aparna recollects, with some bitterness, the night they’d had his star clients over to dinner. She’d had a tough day at work, so she rushed home to get organized but in the hurry she had forgotten to pick up the wine from the Club. As she got busy with the salads and main course, chopping spring onions till tears streamed from her eyes, Rohit had returned from work in a jaunty mood and opened the fridge for water. Rohit asked Aparna:

‘Where’s the wine?’ he’d asked. ‘I forgot. I’m sorry, but I forgot. I was so rushed at the office today—the secretary had bunked—and I had to get the presentation for those blasted new batteries—you know, the new account I was telling you about last week?’ Rohit had stared her coldly. ‘Fuck you. And fuck your new account. When I tell you to make sure there’s wine in the fridge, baby, you bloody well make sure there’s wine in the fridge. Now, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get your ass out of here. Go to the Club and pick the fucking bottles up.’... ‘I warn you, the sequences won’t be pleasant.’ Aparna had jumped into a pair of old jeans and driven halfway across town for the wine cursing Rohit all the way. Forty-five minutes later, she was back in the hot kitchen with just enough time to finish dinner [3].

Aparna knew Rohit does not like food smells in the living-room. So she had to keep herself into the tiny functional kitchen, switched on the exhaust fan and slaved at the time of cooking. In the meantime Rohit listened to jazz in their bedroom. Such occasions she hated the fact that she was a woman. Very often they’d argue about their respective roles in marriage. She’d taunt him: “I thought you were the New Man. I expected you to care and share. But you’re like any other husband. The same old double standards. The same hypocrisies” [3]. Rohit replies that she has miscalculated. Certainly there are double standards for both man and woman, as man’s job is to bring bread and woman’s job is to cook. Aparna retort furiously, “don’t forget I bring home the bread too. I am a serious career person. When we married, you respected my priorities. You knew what you were getting into. If you’d wanted a housemaid, you should marry one” [3].

As a result Aparna’s husband left her forever. Thus, we see that though Rohit like men in society seems very caring and understanding yet when needed, they show there back. Such sort of attitude made working woman’s

life painful. But all men are not insensitive. There are few others who are supportive and understanding towards their spouse but this percentage is quite low in comparison to the tyrannical men.

Women should do her efforts to improve her situation as Kalindi does in the story *Dewali*. In the story *Dewali* Suresh would often comment, “‘Women must be self-sufficient.’ And yet, when Kalindi’s small business took off and she began spending more time outside house, Suresh’s resentment had become vocal and obvious.” [4] Provoked continuously by his ill-temper, one day, she flings back, “I am sick of you bullying, sick of your rudeness, sick of your threats, sick of your accusation” [4]. It is not straight-forward equation of thwarted ambitions. For Kalindi, Suresh induction is a form of betrayal. Despite her husband’s “indifference,” [4] Kalindi experiences the delight of “wholeness” [4]. The dark mood prevailing on the Dewali day cannot crush Kalindi’s recently acquired self-confidence, “There was a light shining *within*- the flame steady and strong. And Kalindi was no longer afraid” [4]. The image of the steady flame of light establishes beyond doubt Kalindi’s autonomous position. De’s message is clear: women of substance have to face contradictory alternatives for self-definition.

Women should empower herself. Empowerment in the context of women’s development is a way of defining, challenging, and overcoming barriers in a woman’s life through which she increases her ability to shape her life and environment. It is an active, multidimensional process, which should enable women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. India envisions a future in which Indian women are independent and self-reliant. It is unfortunate that because of centuries of inertia, ignorance and conservatism, the actual and potential role of women in the society has been ignored, preventing them from making their rightful contribution to social progress.

Money is De’s concern. She observes: “The point of this piece is not whether money-talk should be the second language after one’s mother tongue, but that women should damn well get down to it and understand what the money game is all about.” [5] She says that money matters are managed by women in many of the households. She has also heard a wife being referred to as the finance minister in the family. She regrets that women do not take major money decisions by themselves.

According to Shobha De as woman has been suppressed since time immemorial, she is in need of sympathy, encouragement, support, and inspiration for the full blossoming of her character. She believes that another alternative does not exist any longer. Women should no more be complacent and placid and they should start asserting themselves. Shobha De might deprecate attempts by earnest and enthusiastic researchers to find meanings in her work she had never intended [6], but she is nonetheless an important socio-cultural phenomenon, representing, especially through her popular fiction, the changing social mores of “middle India” [6]: the middle class values of post-independent India, in which a sound education is prized above all else and the term professional refers only to a doctor or an engineer, have been replaced by a colder, harsher, and more openly focused search for money, the real “aphrodisiac” [6].

Woman's economic empowerment is the need of the hour. Participation in income generating activities helps in the overall empowerment of women. Shobha De observes: "It is not enough to have mind of your own, if you don't have income to match...With this economic freedom has come assertiveness, confidence, and refusal to be treated as doormats" [7]. In traditional literature woman's desire for economic self-sufficiency is either ostracized socially or ignored completely. But De's women, realize that female empowerment can only be achieved if economic dependence on men is eliminated.

III.CONCLUSION

Finally one can conclude that in the Indian social arrangement woman has been practically granted a secondary or subaltern position. Obviously 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 subaltern position in all spheres of life. One can call this condition of women as 'economic subalternity'. This subalternity is so prominent that 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. Thus through her works Shobha De not only tells the state of today's woman but also asks a question from the society can women move from subalternity to against subalternity without the loss of her happy social and family life?

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