Socialite Evenings: Woman’s Assertion To Emancipation

Abstract
Women have been fighting a battle against the male dominance that has been prevalent in the society. Although it is a losing battle in a male dominated and traditional society. But women can carve a niche for themselves if they are intellectually strong and bold in their outlook to put aside the Sita-Savitri image and the tradition of submissiveness. The paper discusses the journey of women from assertion to emancipation in the novel-'Socialite Evenings'. A middle class girl who dreams of being part of the upper class society, rebels against the family and tries to create an independent space for herself. She even adopts a militant attitude towards her husband as she does not want to be marginalized in a patriarchal society.

1 Introduction
The journey from assertion to emancipation is symbolic of the winds of social change blowing across the world and intends to focus on “women who are today in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity, they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being.” (1). The battle to come out of the shadow of male dominance has been going on for centuries. The fight for autonomy in a male dominated and traditional society is a tough one “but women can find a respectable place for themselves in the society only if they have an intellectually strong mind to put aside all traditional factors and come out of the Sita-Savitri image and the tradition of submissiveness.” (2)

Shobha De's first novel - 'Socialite Evenings' deals with the story of a middle class girl Karuna who wants to rise above her ranks. She is not ashamed of her sexuality and does not miss any opportunity to cut down to size her male counterparts. But the tug of war between her role as a house maker and her desire for individual freedom and happiness creates a problem for her. The novel describes her journey where she reaches the cross-roads. Her dilemma is to go back to her old life or to be a part of the elite world. Though they have discarded the old order, but have not been able to carve out any new concrete niche for themselves. Finally, the realization is there that individual freedom is just a myth and not a reality.

2 Socialite Evenings: Discussion of Karuna’s Character
Shobha De’s first novel, is the story of a middle class girl Karuna who dreams of being part of the elite society. Her desire “to get out of the closed, boring middle class environment of my family”[12] and her parents’ insistence to stick to the values dear to them, bring out the rebel in her. Though her
parents have given their daughters convent education “Education, with a capital E, of course, was one of the great gods, “[37] still they do not approve of the impact of western culture upon them. Like any typical Indian parents, they expect their children to obey them as they feel “the change from girlhood to adolescence is the awkward age for a girl. The vibrating sensitivity breaks the cocoon and enters into the thrilling excitement of youth; the mind travels from innocence to experience."

Karuna is not ready to bend to her parents authority and rebels at home by “leaving a dirty thali on the dining table, whistling in the bathroom...not cowering in the presence of elders”[15] and in the school she “would try and attract attention by wearing my sash hipster – style, hitching the hem of my dress higher than was allowed.”[15]

All this rebellion is basically to come out of the shadow of belonging to the middle class and to become part of “that charmed circle of rich girls who had everything’. [16] Her hunger to be the part of the elite “grew greater by the day for it was never fed”.[15]

Even Karuna’s friendship with Anjali, looked down upon by her family “her mother had a psychic awareness of the unsuitability of their friendship”[12], is her rebellion against her parents’ wishes. Though she is awestruck with Anjali, but in dilemma about her mixed feelings for her “Anjali was someone out of all those silly novels we’d read in school come alive. I wanted to be her. But I was also afraid for she seemed to represent everything I had been brought up to believe was wrong and evil.”[11] Her dilemma surfaces once again when at the end she wonders, “if I would have gone through all that if Anjali had not been all that I aspired to be”[27]

The rebellion that Karuna has cultivated in the school surfaces with a vengeance when, without her parents’ consent, she opts for a career in modeling. “I suppose it was only the act of rebellion that kept the modeling going for I did not enjoy it much”[24] Even her affair with Bunty, a management trainee in a multinational company, is “only one more step in my rebellion”(25), as her feelings for Bunty are muddled up, “I hated the curtains that hung limply on his bed... I hated the peeling plaster…Yet over I thought he musty I loved cup board him in my own way-he was certainly the most considerate man I’d ever met.[52] But ultimately, she leaves him when she discovers his ordinariness and feels guilty. “I put my face in my hands and wept: for innocents like me, like Bunty, or the dreams we all weave.”[52] Her decision to leave Bunty, whom she loves and still leaves him and then weeps for him, clearly outlines her dilemma and her muddled up thinking.

Karuna’s rebellion against the values dear to her parents and her unconscious adherence to her parents’ teachings “At the back of my mind lurked the thought-good girls didn’t”[26] keep her in a confused state as to what she is looking for. In a last desperate attempt to be part of the elite, she marries “the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time.’[65] because she finds his “head-on, dead-on approach” so different from the hypocrisy she sees around her. She is simply “pushed into it (marriage) by an ‘acceptable’ male who wouldn’t take no for an answer”[58] But the marriage ends “the day our awful honeymoon started” [185] Still she carries on with the marriage “sans passion, sans anything because it suited me”[65] questioning and questing ceaselessly “What was wrong with my marriage? What has gone wrong?’[65]

Karuna struggles against all odds to save the marriage that she loathes, “The more my marriage deadened, the...If harder I tried to convince myself that I was happy enough as I was my husband was unhappy I tried not to argue, only do things the way he wanted. It was easier that way. I was passive and powerless and tried not to think about my problems. For if I thought about them, I’d have to take decisions, the last thing I wanted to do.’[95] She tries hard to keep her marriage going “because, for
all my little rebellion, I was a well-trained Indian wife.'[94] As pointed out by R.S. Pathak, “Traditionally the institution of marriage has been believed to be a religious sacrament in Indian society”(4) and marriage is still considered indissoluble tie, which a husband can break but not a woman, and under any circumstance, she has to reconcile to her fate as “religion and other ameliorating spiritual movements gave her all the consolation they could, in reconciling herself to her fate, but they too excluded her from every position of power.”(5) She feels “like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motion of housekeeping and playing wife. “(69) which she loathes.

3 Karuna’s Dilemma

At the time when Karuna’s dilemma is becoming deep rooted, her eldest sister “who has married the engineer and moved to London”(106) divorces her husband, “I envied my sister. At least she did have the guts to break free from an unhappy situation while here I was still playing out a witless little charade.”[107]. Once again she thinks of getting out of her own predicament but “some spark had been extinguished in me.”[107]

Though Shobha De has portrayed her female characters, eager to be very bold and assertive “who do not depend on their survival –as Manu postulates – on their fathers, husbands and sons. They have the requisite strength to face life with all its ups and downs; they are sharply etched out in terms of their self and identity. They are cast in the mould of new women who solves the problem herself and is assertive, practical and resilient,”(6) still they do not escape from the syndrome of dilemma, confusion, inaction, as in the case of Karuna and Anjali. They are normal educated middle class women, who are independent to some extent, but vulnerable at the same time because of an inalienable bond of tradition. Karuna experiences loss of identity and self-confidence in tackling with her situation.

“The scene was changing even in Bombay. Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single. It was not such a big idea; “[65] But still she does not do anything about her situation. The only solace she has is that even her friends are “stuck with similar husbands”[65] who are all average Indian husbands “unexciting, uninspiring, untutored”,[65].

These women though create an outcry over their miserable marriages; they do not want to give up the economic and social security offered by this institution. In Indian scenario, marriage is regarded as “a religious sacrament of fulfil the stages in one’s life and to attain eternal salvation and secondarily as a duty towards the social disorder. It is also seen as a security against economic and sexual aggression.’(7) Karuna sums up the lot of all her friends, “We were an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left.”[65] She feels suffocated in the same situation, but seeing her friends also in the same mess, she creates “a liberated –woman fantasy persona for myself – passively and secretly of course.”[65]. For some time she is restrained by her middle class background and morality and keeps
oscillating between tradition and modernity that incapacitates her, but then, she also goes her friends’, Anjali and Ritu, ways and breaks loose of the marital bond and starts a torrid affair with Krish, her husband’s friend.

Gulshan Rai Kataria observes in his essay ‘The Faces of Eve’, ‘The strident aspect of the amazon is seen in a woman who likes to be equal, protests against male superiority, and does not recognize any authority’(8). Karuna adopts a militant attitude towards her husband who epitomizes all husbands in general, who “were not evil, but what they did to our lives went beyond evil. We were reduced to being marginal people”[69] This marginalized position has always been the lot of Indian women “since patriarchal times women have, in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world…in spite of the fact that women contribute numerically at…that least his half of the human race secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environment forces of educational and social traditions under the purposeful control of men.’ (9) In a way, her affair with Krish is her revenge on her husband for being indifferent towards her. She is starved of emotional fulfilment and so turns to Krish for survival and sustenance.

Adultery “is woman’s sole defense against the domestic slavery in which she is bound”(10) and when a woman feels suffocated and confined in marriage and is “sexually unsatisfied, doomed to make crudeness, ‘condemned to male ugliness’, she finds consolation in a young lover.” (11) At this juncture also she is not ready to give up on her marriage “because I did not want to be known as a failure’[65]. She is conscious of the fact that she is committing adultery, but continues to plunge deeper into it with feelings of spite against her husband and feels no guilt when her husband finds out about it.

All along Karuna has been trying to gather courage to end her marriage and so far does not succeed, but when her husband drops the bomb of divorce, she is in panic. “I began worrying about the implications where I’d live and how I’d live and how I’d break the news to my parents.’[216] This also brings out her dilemma of coping up with the outcome of her own doings. She does not want to go to her parents as a failure and in her confused state she blames, not her rebellious nature but her middle class background for her present misery “I doubt that I’d have done the things that I felt compelled to do if we hadn’t been so middle class’[37]. Her dilemma becomes quite apparent when she starts cursing herself for something she has always wanted – secretly ‘How badly…why timed had the I been whole so thing was dense as to not have seen the signs earlier? Had I really been so sure of myself that I’d thought I could pull it off?’[216] Initially, she is in shock but later on reconciles and decides to establish her own identity. She becomes a stage actress and meets Girish, a film producer. They share a comfortable relationship and when Girish sends a marriage proposal through his son, Kunal, she is undecided. This is her chance to get what she has always wanted – love and emotional fulfilment and she feels “confused and happy at the same time.’[270] Again she starts questioning herself “was this what I was looking for? [(270) there by again bringing in the element of dilemma.

All though her life Karuna has been a rebel, rebelling against everything her family stood form hating her middle class background and living life she has wanted. Still happiness and fulfillment elude her and now when she has the chance to get back everything she has lost – security, status, money by accepting Girish’ proposal, she is in dilemma. And the reason is, she has now totally discarded the old order and freed herself from the bond of marriage, but has still not decided on a new course of action. She is still undecided about her future and the outcome of this vacuum is dilemma. Finally Karan’s devotion to his father shows her the path. She decides to look after her parents at last and moves in with them. ‘Living with my parents had opened up a new dimension for me. I felt like a responsible, caring daughter for the first time. They needed me. And I needed them’.
After going through lot of unhappiness and heartbreaks, she, finally, is able to resolve her dilemma. Even her mother’s repeated appeals to her ‘A woman...A cannot live alone woman needs...a woman’s man’s real protection place is in her husband’s home’ [275] do not deter her from her resolution to stay single “why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don’t really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself.” [276] Her questioning of authenticity of what her mother is saying to her brings out the fact that in the Indian society, the traditional sense of security is no longer associated with the institution of marriage. 

Karuna’s friend and her ideal since school days, Anjali, another important character in the novel, whom Karuna admires from the day one she meets her “for achieving what ninety percent of India’s middle class spend two-thirds of their lives trying to achieve –the step up to the glories of the rich and famous”[36-37] cannot imagine life without a male presence “How will I go to the club alone? I hate to walk into a room without a man next to me.”[64-65] For Anjali, men are means to gain status in society. That is why though belonging to a middle class Gujarati family; she throws off the conventional moral values by wayside and tries to seductively rise from her middle class background to the upper rung of the society through her marriage to Abe, a rich Muslim businessman, and “an experienced rake with a wild reputation”[11] “Adjustment in marriage is so much easier when two people come from similar social, cultural and religious background and so much exacting when it is not so.” (12) Herr’s is a marriage of convenience; a way to come out of her middle class status and trickery forms its basis. “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 useful channels without at the same time suppressing sex.”(13) The marriage takes its toll on Anjali, who suffers humiliation and frustrations due to insensitive and promiscuous nature of her husband. She faces dilemma when her marriage, which she has planned cunningly, fails since it does not have any concrete base. “Economic security for wife seems to be the corner stone of the marriage arrangement which appears more like a contract than a vibrant, living, emotional relationship. Devoid of emotional warmth and entered into for expediency, such marriages often break down, leading to divorce and sundering of the family ties.” (14)

Anjali tries to find reasons for the failure of her marriage and blames herself for it “May be I handled him all wrong.” [40] She confesses that she has been looking for a father figure in her husband “May be I married him because...It was he a lovely treated feeling me like a baby to be indulged. My father never did it.”[41] Under these circumstances, her marriage is bound to fail. But her dilemma is short lived and she moves on from one relationship to the next, in search of a male anchor and ultimately, ends up marrying a gay businessman.

4 Finding solace in spiritualism & leading to disillusionment
As a woman, she “projects her own sexual breakthroughs, energy, desire, onto a man as if such powers have nothing to do with her.”[15] Initially, she is disillusioned but resolves it by finding solace in spiritualism. “When an unhappy wife has no place to turn to and her husband neglects her, she sometimes tries to spiritualize her sorrow into devotion to the God or by dedication herself to social work.”(16)Ritu, another rich socialite, is a “natural flirt” who “enjoyed every nugget of attention she got. She could seduce someone over the phone, she was that good at it.”[108-109] Her only grudge against her husband is “his lack of drive and general unadventurous ness”[108] but she maintains other ways for temporary amusement. She deserts her second husband, has a series of brief
affairs and becomes the mistress of a smuggler, Gul “Gul is the best thing that could have happened to me. “So far, Ritu has live life on her terms but now she is stuck with Gul. Her supposedly love relationship with Gul turns her into a whore and a pimp who procures girls for Gul and his friends. As she has “nowhere else to go” [220], she endures mental and physical torture at the hands of her ‘lover’. Her own waywardness had landed her in this dilemma, from where she has no escape. She even tries suicide. Speaking of the reactions of jilted women, Simone Beauvoir says, “If he loves her less than she wants him to, if she fails to engross him... all her narcissism transformed to self-disgust, into humiliation, into hatred of herself, which drives her to self-punishment. During such crises, she will make herself a voluntary victim.”(17) But she is saved and ultimately goes back to her husband as sexually violated, physically and mentally wrecked woman.

The dilemma faced by the female characters in Socialite Evenings is the outcome of their own undoing; their blind urge to emulate the elite and in this process, they are uprooted and wander aimlessly in the jungle full of female devourers. In the beginning, these women discard the social norms and march ahead on the path of emancipation and liberation and once they achieve their desire, they find themselves all alone and feel lost. With no support and no clear path outlined for them, disillusionment sets in and plunges them into dilemma, now they have two choices to make- either to come back to their roots or to continue suffering. Shobha De’s “women characters who endeavour to liberate themselves often meet with disaster . Before this happens, they send a whole host of taboos devised by patriarchal order card wheeling”(18) like Karuna and Anjali. But Karuna finds a middle path where she does not compromise with her single, unmarried status and still fulfills her duty as a responsible daughter and Anjali finds solace in religion.

Now the important question that arises is whether these females have really achieved their heart’s desire or they have withdrawn from the struggle. Looking after one’s parents and finding solace in spiritualism are basically short-term goals one sets out to achieve. But these solutions may not sustain peace of mind for long, after that then what? Basically what these females are lacking is Purpose with capital P in life. They are moving aimlessly in a blind alley. They need a purpose that can sustain them in long run – purpose that can be defined in terms of family, children, caring for them and of course personal progress- professionally as well as socially.

It is also true that the quality of life depends upon the quality of purpose. The female characters in Socialite Evenings have only one purpose- to be part of the elite world and to achieve this they pay a heavy price- losing their peace of mind, leading to disillusionment and finally landing them in dilemma, as to where they have gone wrong in their choices. Another thing is, individual freedom is just a myth and not reality. No man or woman can be complete without each other. In fact they complement each other. D.H. Lawrence rightly says, “The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relationship between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child, will always be subsidiary.”(19) One must accept that two different individuals with different personalities, perceptions, living under the same roof are bound to have differences. The need of the hour is to resolve these differences without erasing each other’s personalities. Then only disillusionments and dilemmas can be curbed to a large extent.

5 Conclusion

The delima faced by the female characters in ‘Socialite Evenings’ is the outcome of their own undoing. Their blind urge to emulate the elite results in their uproot from their traditions. In the beginning the women characters i.e Karuna, Ritu, Anjali and Gul discard their social norms and
march ahead on the path of emancipation and liberation. Once they achieve their desire, they find themselves all alone and lost. With no support and no clear path outlined for them, this disillusionment sets on and plunges them into dilemma. Now they have two choices to make- either to come back to their roots or continue suffering. Karuna finds a middle path where she does not compromise with her single unmarried status and still fulfils her duty as a responsible daughter.

References


[3] Ibid. p.104


[5] Kanwar Muhammad Ashraf, Life and Condition of the People of India, p.166


