Indian Hypocrisy in Shobha De’s "Second Thoughts"

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Abstract:

Shobha De, one of the most eminent and popular Indian novelists of our time, has intimate understanding of the psyche of woman and her problems. She focuses on women’s problems and gives a new approach to them. She is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. Second Thoughts is her bold attempt, especially in our traditional society, in which she portrays a New Woman in the character of Maya—a charming young girl, who dares to have on second thoughts on Nikhil when Ranjan, her husband, is of no use for her and she has no other way out.

Maya, whose name itself symbolically presents a fascination, is not a typical traditional Indian woman. She is a very attractive young girl, trained as a textile designer and interested to pursue her career in future. Ranjan is equally handsome and ambitious. He has 'thick dark hair, the intense large eyes', 'strong chest and shoulders'. (51) In their first arranged meeting, Maya and Ranjan like each other. Mrs. Malik, Ranjan's mother, also realizes that they have made right choice in Maya.

Well, but in the case of Maya and Ranjan, the well-planned and chosen match is in fact a mismatch. Maya is a romantic girl, wants romance and excitement in her life. Though she belongs to a middle class traditional family, she had her own dreams. Once she lands in Bombay, she falls in love with Bombay. She wants to be a part of Bombay, wants to live her life like a typical Bombay-girl. She thought that marrying with Ranjan means marrying with Bombay. When she met Ranjan, she was more excited at the prospect of settling in Bombay—the city of her dreams.

Ranjan has a certain mental picture of a wife. His responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a decent house and four square meals a day. He is completely indifferent to Maya's emotional desires. And it is this detached attitude of Ranjan that hurts Maya immensely. Ranjan constantly reminds Maya of her duties as a married woman. Soon Maya realizes that her life has a bitter taste. There is no any choice to get individual's dream-world in real life as everyone is bound with life's duty. A person has to make sacrifice of her/his dream to survive her/his existence. So, here the matter is about 'existence', not of an 'identity'. Maya has her own dreams, hopes and desires, but all scattered just after her marriage. She wants to make her free identity, but succeeds to make her existence only. Maya awakes from her dreams just after her marriage.

Secondly, Maya is also become a victim of the age-old Indian tradition. Marriage ushers glamour, fascination and freedom for most young girls. Almost all Indian middle class girls have the same dream to begin their new life with full of hope and aspirations because they have been told that a girl gets her new birth when she gets married. Maya—a girl of imagination wants to start her new life with good expectations. She knew that she married Ranjan because she wanted "to get away from Calcutta and a family with whom I didn't really feel a sense of belonging." (252).

It is a great tragedy of an Indian girl who has been trained and treated as someone else property from the very beginning period of her parental home. Maya experienced the same. When she was young, her mother made her conscious about her nakedness. She
even stopped hugging her daughter. Later when she reached her youth, Chitra said that she should not allow anybody to touch her or allow anybody to come closer because she was a young lady. She is very conscious about Maya's chastity and says that she was not worried about Maya as she was very pure. Well, we are living in such a hypocritical society where a woman is worshipped like a Goddess in the form of Shakti, but treated her unwanted, as an inferior being. A girl has been considered as a liability by her parental home. As the girl child attains puberty, she becomes sexually vulnerable and requires protection. The burden has to be shifted as soon as possible and her marriage is considered a priority. Why does make this kind of gender discrimination? Simply because, the male child keeps the flame of the family line alight and passes it on from one generation to the next?

Girls are often looked over before they are chosen as brides—sometimes liked, sometimes disliked. They are on trial. The difficulty of finding husbands for ugly, dark-skinned, unvirtuous, or dowry-poor girl is very great. The girl with the fairest skin in the family has the best marriage chances. Shobha De truly revealed this plight of an Indian girl in *Second Thoughts*. Chitra too, like a typical Indian mother, 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 daughter-in-law. 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 can blink our eyes" (3). As a typical Indian girl's mother, we observed Chitra's at once approval of all Mrs. Malik's belief. For instance, when Mrs. Malik lays down the rules and explains tersely those girls can only be moulded if they stop thinking of their parents' home as their own, Chitra agrees with her at once:

"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)

Mrs. Malik, as a typical Indian mother-in-law, too has a very clear picture of her future daughter-in-law. We have an echo of a traditional mother-in-law when she comments 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 while selecting the right candidate for Ranjan" (231).

But the hypocrisy of Indian marriage is revealed when Chitra drops a hint that her daughter is eager to pursue a career later in life. Mrs. Malik does not like the idea. She raises her one eyebrow and said, "Career? What kind of a career?" (10). Ranjan too, agrees with his mother's view and declares: "I believe it is a woman's duty to run a good home" (11). The author focuses here on the hollowness of Indian marriage that the Indian in-law family wants its bride with efficiency but never allows her to cross the threshold.

However, Chitra issues, as the traditional woman, the standard instructions to Maya that marriage involves sacrifice which has to be undertaken by the woman. Chitra's response is so traditional to the Mrs. Malik's remark, when Mrs. Malik tried to declare the dominancy of Indian boy as well as his mother in a house by saying that "our Indian boys are so spoilt, you know."

"Don't I know it? It's the same story in our house. Maya's father acts like an absolute lord at home. So does his brother—and mind you, he's younger. Don't worry, Maya is used to housework" (10),

ISSN 0976-9714
It is the pressure of deep rooted system of thinking, that working on both—Ranjan as well as Maya. Ranjan makes restrictions on Maya and Maya mutely suffers everything as of being a virtuous wife. Ranjan has studied abroad, brought up in a modern city, yet conservative. He imposes restrictions on Maya's movements too. Maya is not free in the house which is probably Ranjan's house because Ranjan neglects even her presence in his decent house. The twelfth chapter of the novel shows Maya is apparently neglecting her house. Maya is not free to go anywhere in the city. She cannot feel free even in the house. Maya sulks in the kitchen that is the only place in the house "which had become symbolic of her refuge". (39) The STD facility on phone is locked for her. Ranjan's lectures on wifely duties, his complete control even on the use of the air-conditioner, his insistence to Maya, adoring his mother as role-model for her etc. make feel Maya suffocation. Ranjan's responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a decent house and four square meals a day. Maya realized that 'He had married me to satisfy his mother, or may be something within him (252). Ranjan is completely indifferent to Maya's emotional desires. And it is this detached attitude of Ranjan that hurts Maya immensely. She longs for the 'perfect-romantic companion'—a true love, the natural need of a woman. Ranjan longs to be on his own leading the life of a promising bank executive'. So neither of them is 'cool' but the areas of their warmth are different. It can be said that "Two uncool people stuck together in unholy matrimony" (200). She sympathises on both, Ranjan too, "locked together in a relationship that didn't satisfy either of us" (252).

However, Maya's hope entirely shattered during their four-day clumsy sex honeymoon in Mahabaleshwar, a hill resort near Bombay. Maya is in a love-making mood, but Ranjan 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" (53). On another occasion, 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 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). However, Maya has learned from him an enquiry that he slept with other women, he tried, but 'it didn't work' (52).

In such a desperate condition Nikhil Verma a good looking, confident, sporty, cocky, flirtatious, lazy 1 spoilt and quite irresistible (32) enters into Maya's life. Nikhil, he is an enthusiastic fellow who believes in freedom of life. A boy like Nikhil would never mind to misuse a lonely woman like Maya. She is romantic by nature. However, her longings bring an unbearable sadness a in her life. Nikhil brings a new meaning of existence for her.

Nikhil encourages her to do something spontaneous in her life. The very first chapter of the novel starts with the words of Nikhil with an implying meaning, "Don't you ever get out of the house?"(15). Maya's dreams once again surface. She wants to be free and alive. She is in search of adventure and she indulges in it now. Nikhil tactfully traps Maya. Maya is not a cheap woman. Her traditional upbringing stops Nikhil's further advances. She knows that it is very wrong for a married woman to go out with a man, especially if her husband does not know about it. But in the heart of her hearts, she wants to justify that she has not done anything wrong. She even mocks on her thinking for Nikhil, "This was ridiculous—a newly married woman day-dreaming about a neighbour's young son. Disgusting. And shameful." (32) She has no any intention of having a sexual relationship with Nikhil. She only likes having Nikhil around her. Maya, who was constantly neglected, humiliated and hurt, now felt that there is someone who bothered for her, saw some good in her, stirs her greatly.
Shobha De here honestly eulogizes the element of love in a woman. Maya, who desired earlier to satisfy her natural need of a woman, by her husband Ranjan, satisfied now by Nikhil. It doesn't matter now whether she is a married woman or not! She at that time only acquainted with love I She felt its power that love is not getting, but giving; not a wild dream of pleasure, and a madness of desire—oh, no, love is not that—it is goodness and honour, and peace and pure living. Maya was unable to reason anything, at that time. She only felt and enjoyed of it.

Thus, Maya doesn't want to think that her affair with Nikhil is good for her or bad. She just wants to get lost in this romantic episode. That's why when Ranjan returns from the hospital, Maya is still “raw and shaking from having had a man inside” (277). Her body is still "tingling from having been brought to life so acutely" (277). Life had just become worth living for her. It is, in fact second life for her. This little affair with Nikhil gives a new force to Maya to live a life. Once again, she started to dream of her glorious relation with Nikhil. She just waits for the appropriate time to proclaim her decision. Maya's this decision might prove a bold step for her, for Ranjan's family as well as for her parental family, if Nikhil gives a green-signal for marriage. But here, at this juncture Shobha De explores the hollowness and hypocrisy of the typical, conservative attitude of the Indian society that even a boy like Nikhil, a product of the modern generation too followed the societal norms as far as marriage is concerned. He wanted to make free Maya from her tedious life with Ranjan. It was Nikhil who insisted Maya "Act real, pet real" (105) and trapped her in spell of love. But when comes to marriage, it is an arranged one. Maya's dream world shatters again when Pushpa, Nikhil's mother breaks the news to Maya about her son's engagement. Maya's brief adventure, magic and romance with Nikhil is all over.

Here, the title Second Thoughts is tactfully appealing to us. The author asks a question through her title that—who does need to have second thoughts?

Maya—who thinks about Nikhil, when she has no other way out. Ranjan—a man to whom it was very difficult to get into a relationship with any woman.

Nikhil—a product of the modern generation who does not mind taking one-night-stands with frustrated married women.

Society—that forced woman to follow the path of sacrifice and adjustment, if she needs to survive, not live.

Obviously, the possible answer is Society, its age-old traditions, its conservative notions and its different standard for man and woman. Maya feels guilt when she is betraying Ranjan. But then she asks the question to herself, "Is it a sin to want to go out and breathe the air?" This voice is simply come out from a human being rather a sex. Maya is first of all a human being than a woman. Indian society needs to have second thoughts that if it does not give up its hollow-ness and hypocrisy, a number of women like Maya will cross their threshold. Ranjan is the best example of the traditional upbringing who is entirely devoted to his mother and there is nothing in him to give Maya. But society never puts trial on a man whether he is right or wrong, whether he is Ranjan or Nikhil. Woman is its favourite subject.

So, Indian Society should need to have second thoughts to change its double-standard attitude towards a woman. However, marriage is one of the most serious institutes of society, and both man as well as woman's contribution is eminent in it. No one is superior or inferior. Both are equal. Both should be complementary to each other. If a woman gets her true place, she need not have second thoughts.

References:

3. *Shobha De’ Second Thoughts*
4. All the textual references are from *Shobha De’* Penguin Books, *Second Thoughts*