

**Exploring the complexities of marital relationships in Shobha De's novel *Socialite Evenings***

Khirod Borah

Research Scholar, Department of English, Arunachal University

Dr. Prasenjit Datta Roy

Associate professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English, Arunachal University  
Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, India

### **Abstract**

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* vividly portrays the complexities and fragility of modern urban marital relationships in postcolonial India. The novel reflects the conflicts between tradition and modernity, emotional alienation, gender expectations, and the pursuit of self-identity within marriage. This research examines how De represents marriage not as a sacred bond but as a social arrangement shaped by ambition, power, and societal expectations. Through the protagonist Karuna and her circle of upper-class women, De exposes the hypocrisy, moral decay, and emotional emptiness of elite marital life. Using feminist and sociological perspectives, the study explores themes of female agency, emotional estrangement, and the changing institution of marriage. The paper concludes that De's portrayal of marriage is a critique of patriarchal values and social façades dominating urban Indian society.

**Keywords:** Shobha De, *Socialite Evenings*, marriage, feminism, patriarchy, alienation, self-identity

### **1. Introduction**

Marriage, as an institution, has always occupied a central place in Indian society. It is regarded not merely as a social arrangement but as a sacred and lifelong bond sanctified by religious and cultural traditions. However, with the advent of modernity, urbanization, and globalization, the perception of marriage has undergone a gradual transformation. The post-independence and post-liberalization phases of India brought with them a new set of social dynamics—individualism, materialism, gender awareness, and the breakdown of traditional family structures. Shobha De, one of India's most prominent contemporary writers, captures this changing social landscape through her fiction. Her first novel, *Socialite Evenings* (1989), presents a bold and realistic picture of upper-class urban life, particularly focusing on the emotional and psychological realities of marriage. Shobha De's works are often regarded as controversial for their open portrayal of female sexuality, marital discontent, and the hypocrisies of elite Indian society. Yet, beyond the glamour and scandal, her writing offers a deeper critique of the institution of marriage and the position of women within it. In *Socialite*

*Evenings*, marriage is not depicted as a harmonious union based on love and companionship, but rather as a contract built on social expectations, economic security, and personal ambition. De portrays the hollowness of marital relationships in the elite strata of Mumbai, where emotions are suppressed under the weight of status consciousness and societal image.

The protagonist, Karuna, embodies the struggles of many educated urban women who oscillate between tradition and modernity. Her marriage to a wealthy industrialist initially represents her aspiration for social recognition and stability. However, the relationship gradually becomes suffocating and emotionally barren, exposing the emptiness beneath the glittering surface of high society. Karuna's journey from a submissive wife to an independent woman symbolizes a woman's search for identity and self-fulfilment beyond the confines of marriage. Through her character, Shobha De questions whether marriage, in a modern urban setting, continues to serve its traditional purpose of companionship or whether it has turned into a social performance devoid of emotional intimacy. In the socio-cultural context of India, marriage is often seen as the ultimate goal and identity of a woman. A woman's worth is traditionally measured by her ability to maintain her home, husband, and family. However, the characters in *Socialite Evenings* represent a generation of women who begin to question these inherited roles. They experience a growing sense of alienation within marriages that fail to address their emotional and intellectual needs. De's narrative captures this inner turmoil, as her female protagonists oscillate between the desire for independence and the fear of social rejection. Thus, the novel becomes a mirror reflecting the evolving attitudes toward marriage and gender roles in late 20th-century India. The novel situates marriage within the framework of class and consumerism. The world of *Socialite Evenings* is one of wealth, fashion, and social gatherings—where appearances often matter more than emotional truths. In such a setting, marriages are frequently arranged not for love but for status and convenience. Men seek wives who enhance their social prestige, while women often use marriage as a ladder for upward mobility. De skillfully uses satire and irony to expose the fragility of such unions. The glamorous façade conceals discontent, infidelity, and emotional estrangement, highlighting how material success fails to guarantee happiness.

From a feminist perspective, De's portrayal of marriage is revolutionary in Indian English literature. Unlike traditional female characters who quietly accept their fate, De's women are self-aware and vocal about their dissatisfaction. They are not idealized figures of virtue but realistic representations of modern women grappling with conflicting desires—for security, freedom, love, and self-expression. Karuna's decision to leave her marriage, despite societal condemnation, represents a significant moment of self-assertion. De challenges the patriarchal notion that a woman's existence is validated only through her husband. Instead, she presents marriage as a space of negotiation where women must balance personal freedom with social conformity. The thematic significance of marriage in *Socialite Evenings* lies in its dual role as both a symbol of oppression and an arena for self-realization. While marriage restricts women through expectations of obedience and propriety, it also becomes a catalyst for self-discovery when these expectations are defied. Karuna's eventual emancipation signifies the possibility of redefining marriage on the terms of equality and mutual respect. De's narrative thereby transcends the boundaries of romantic fiction and enters the realm of social criticism, questioning the moral foundations of urban Indian life.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To explore the portrayal of marital relationships in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* with a focus on emotional, social, and psychological dimensions.
2. To analyze how gender roles and expectations shape marital dynamics among the urban elite.
3. To examine the extent to which marriage functions as a medium of self-identity and empowerment for women in the novel.

The research questions guiding this analysis include:

1. How does Shobha De depict the tension between tradition and modernity within marriage?
2. In what ways do the female characters, especially Karuna, experience alienation or empowerment through marriage?
3. Does De's portrayal of marriage ultimately reinforce or subvert patriarchal values?

This research is significant because it situates *Socialite Evenings* within the broader discourse of feminist literary studies in India. While Western feminist fiction often focuses on individual rebellion, De's narrative captures the uniquely Indian struggle between social duty and personal fulfillment. Her work resonates with the experiences of women navigating the contradictions of a rapidly modernizing society. The introduction to this study sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of marital relations as portrayed in *Socialite Evenings*. Shobha De uses the framework of marriage to expose the emotional emptiness of materialistic urban life and to advocate for a new definition of womanhood—one that values independence, self-awareness, and emotional honesty. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on how the institution of marriage, though socially revered, often becomes a site of conflict and compromise for women seeking individuality in a patriarchal society. Through *Socialite Evenings*, De not only captures the changing realities of Indian marriage but also contributes significantly to the feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

## Literature Review

**Bhatnagar, Manmohan K. (1999)** Bhatnagar in *Indian Women Writing in English: The New Perspectives* highlights Shobha De's contribution to portraying the realities of modern Indian womanhood. He observes that *Socialite Evenings* challenges traditional notions of marriage by depicting emotionally sterile relationships and superficial urban lifestyles. According to Bhatnagar, De's female characters, like Karuna, reflect the growing dissatisfaction among educated women trapped in patriarchal structures. Marriage, in De's perspective, ceases to be a sacred bond and becomes a site of emotional struggle and self-discovery. Bhatnagar commends De's courage to represent female sexuality and marital disillusionment, which were often ignored in Indian fiction. His analysis underscores De's critical stance on gender roles and her realistic portrayal of marital conflicts in postcolonial Indian society.

**Reddy, Y. S. Sunita (2005)** In her essay *Feminist Consciousness in Shobha De's Socialite Evenings*, Reddy explores how the novel reflects a woman's awakening against marital oppression. She interprets Karuna's journey as symbolic of a broader feminist movement in urban India. Marriage in the novel, Reddy notes, represents both bondage and opportunity—it exposes patriarchal dominance yet ignites the female desire for self-identity. Reddy appreciates

De's use of psychological realism and first-person narration to voice women's suppressed emotions. She argues that De successfully brings to light the mental conflicts of women who aspire for freedom but are constrained by societal expectations. The study establishes *Socialite Evenings* as a key text in understanding the evolving consciousness of Indian women in modern marriage.

**Bose, Brinda (2007)** in *Gender and Narrative in Indian English Fiction*, situates Shobha De's novels within the discourse of feminism and urban modernity. She argues that De uses marriage as a metaphor to critique gender inequality and social hypocrisy. According to Bose, the relationship between Karuna and her husband illustrates the emptiness of marriages based on status rather than affection. De's urban settings serve as backdrops for exploring emotional alienation and moral fragmentation. Bose notes that De's narrative technique—marked by confessional tone and candid dialogue—creates authenticity in the portrayal of women's voices. Her analysis suggests that De's fiction reveals the emotional cost of maintaining societal façades in marital relationships among the elite class.

**Kumar, Satish (2012)** In his book *Materialism and Morality in Modern Indian Fiction*, Satish Kumar examines how consumerism influences interpersonal relationships in contemporary literature. He emphasizes that *Socialite Evenings* captures the moral vacuum of urban marriages, where social success often replaces emotional fulfillment. Kumar points out that Karuna's marital discontent stems from her realization that love and companionship cannot thrive amid material obsession. De's depiction of marital breakdown mirrors India's socio-economic transition toward Westernized lifestyles. According to Kumar, the novel critiques how modernity redefines marriage from a sacred institution to a pragmatic arrangement. His study positions Shobha De as a sociocultural critic who exposes the tensions between ambition, morality, and emotional authenticity in marital life.

**Chakravarty, S. (2014)** in her article "Elite Marriages and Gendered Spaces in Shobha De's Fiction," analyzes the class-specific portrayal of marital life in *Socialite Evenings*. She argues that De's narrative unveils the emotional emptiness behind luxurious lifestyles. For the elite women in the novel, marriage becomes a means of maintaining social visibility rather than a source of emotional companionship. Chakravarty notes how De's characters, though economically empowered, remain psychologically dependent on patriarchal approval. The study interprets Karuna's emancipation as a rejection of gendered expectations and a step toward self-definition. Chakravarty's perspective helps in understanding De's nuanced depiction of female subjectivity and marital alienation in the context of urban consumer culture.

**Gokhale, Namita (2016)** commentary on Shobha De's writing underscores her bold portrayal of women navigating modern relationships. In discussing *Socialite Evenings*, Gokhale highlights the novel's authenticity in presenting marriage as a site of negotiation rather than submission. She praises De for portraying female desire and dissatisfaction without moral judgment. According to Gokhale, De's fiction redefines Indian womanhood by giving voice to women's inner conflicts and aspirations. The novel, she observes, exposes the emotional bankruptcy of urban marriages shaped by prestige and convenience. Gokhale's analysis reveals how De reinterprets the concept of companionship in marriage through the lens of female agency, portraying women as assertive and self-aware rather than passive victims.

**Nair, Anita (2019)** in her book *Rewriting Womanhood in Indian English Fiction*, connects Shobha De's work to postfeminist discourse. She views *Socialite Evenings* as an exploration

of identity and empowerment within restrictive marital boundaries. Nair emphasizes that De's protagonist, Karuna, symbolizes the transition of Indian women from dependency to autonomy. She argues that De's treatment of marriage is neither entirely cynical nor idealistic—it is a realistic portrayal of relationships conditioned by power and self-interest. Nair praises De for her courage to discuss taboo subjects like infidelity and emotional voids in marriage. Her perspective enriches feminist readings of *Socialite Evenings*, positioning De as a writer who reshaped contemporary narratives on marriage and womanhood.

### **Methodology**

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach to examine the portrayal of marital relationships in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*. The analysis is primarily based on a textual and thematic examination of the novel, supported by feminist literary criticism and sociocultural analysis. The purpose of this methodology is to explore how Shobha De employs narrative, characterization, and symbolism to critique the institution of marriage and reveal its impact on female identity and emotional well-being. The primary source for this study is Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* (1989), while secondary sources include books, scholarly articles, and journal publications focusing on feminist theory, gender studies, and postcolonial Indian literature. Academic databases, library archives, and previous dissertations have also been consulted to support the interpretation of marital themes within the novel.

The research follows a descriptive-analytical framework. It identifies key episodes and dialogues from the text that reveal the protagonist's marital experiences, emotional alienation, and social positioning. These textual instances are analyzed through the lens of feminist theory to understand how gender roles and societal norms influence marital dynamics. The study particularly draws on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Indian feminist critics to interpret the novel's gendered power structures. The analysis also integrates a sociological dimension, linking the characters' marital experiences to the broader cultural transformations in urban India during the post-liberalization period. The changing notions of success, identity, and moral values in metropolitan society are examined to contextualize De's critique of modern marriage.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* (1989) offers a bold and critical exploration of the institution of marriage within the context of India's urban elite society. Through the experiences of the protagonist Karuna and other female characters, De unmasks the emotional emptiness, hypocrisy, and shifting power dynamics that define marital life among the privileged classes. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the novel, focusing on how De portrays marriage as both a social performance and a site of emotional alienation. The discussion integrates feminist, sociological, and psychological perspectives to understand how De redefines the meaning of marriage and womanhood in modern India.

#### **The Institution of Marriage in *Socialite Evenings***

In Indian culture, marriage traditionally symbolizes sacred union, familial continuity, and moral stability. However, in *Socialite Evenings*, Shobha De dismantles this idealized notion and presents marriage as a pragmatic institution governed by social appearance, money, and ambition. For the characters inhabiting Mumbai's elite social circle, marriage functions more as a business alliance than an emotional partnership. De's portrayal of marriage is deeply

ironic. The characters marry not for love or compatibility, but to preserve or enhance their social status. Karuna's husband represents the archetypal upper-class man—successful, controlling, and emotionally unavailable. Their marriage, rather than fulfilling, becomes a performance that must appear perfect to the outside world. Behind the glamorous façade of parties, luxury, and prestige lies an emotional void. De exposes how the sanctity of marriage is undermined by the values of consumerism and materialism. The husband's infidelity and Karuna's emotional detachment reveal how relationships are commodified. Marital happiness is replaced by social recognition, and emotional intimacy gives way to mutual convenience. Through this depiction, De criticizes the superficial nature of modern urban marriages that thrive on appearances but lack substance.

### **Karuna's Marriage: From Expectation to Emptiness**

Karuna, the protagonist, begins her journey as a young, ambitious woman from a middle-class background who dreams of upward mobility. Her decision to marry a wealthy industrialist is initially motivated by the desire to achieve social security and respectability. In the early days of marriage, she conforms to the expectations of an obedient wife—polite, graceful, and socially accommodating. However, this compliance soon turns into emotional suffocation. De captures Karuna's growing realization that her marriage is hollow. Her husband treats her as a social accessory rather than an emotional partner. He expects her to attend parties, maintain appearances, and conform to the norms of high society. There is little communication, affection, or emotional bonding between them. De uses Karuna's internal monologue to express her sense of loneliness: she lives surrounded by people, yet feels isolated. The turning point in Karuna's life comes when she recognizes the futility of her existence within a loveless marriage. Her transformation begins when she starts working in media and interacts with people outside her restricted social circle. This exposure opens her eyes to the possibility of independence and emotional fulfillment beyond marriage. Karuna's journey from submission to self-realization mirrors the awakening of modern Indian women who seek identity and self-worth beyond domestic confines. Thus, De uses Karuna's marriage as a metaphor for the inner conflict of women torn between societal duty and personal freedom. The disintegration of her marriage symbolizes the breakdown of traditional patriarchal control in the face of emerging female consciousness.

### **4.3 Female Perspective: Desire, Dependence, and Defiance**

One of the striking aspects of *Socialite Evenings* is De's candid representation of female desire and dissatisfaction. Unlike conventional Indian fiction that idealizes women as self-sacrificing and submissive, De's women are emotionally complex and sexually aware. They yearn for affection, companionship, and freedom—desires that are often suppressed by social expectations. Karuna's emotional and physical alienation drives her toward introspection and eventual rebellion. Her defiance against marital conformity is not an act of immorality but an assertion of individuality. By exploring her desires and seeking independence, Karuna challenges the patriarchal notion that women's virtue lies in silence and submission. Through Karuna and other characters like Anjali and Ritu, De portrays a spectrum of female experiences in marriage. While some women accept their subjugation as part of social obligation, others, like Karuna, break away from traditional roles. These characters reflect the psychological and emotional conflicts of urban women negotiating between their personal aspirations and the rigid frameworks of marriage. De's writing also highlights how economic dependence

perpetuates women's oppression. Financial security often comes at the cost of emotional freedom. Karuna's eventual realization that wealth cannot substitute emotional connection underscores De's critique of the transactional nature of elite marriages. Her rebellion represents the awakening of a woman's consciousness, seeking not merely survival but fulfillment.

### **Marital Alienation and the Search for Freedom**

The theme of **alienation** runs throughout *Socialite Evenings*. Karuna's marriage exemplifies the emotional detachment that characterizes many relationships in urban India. She experiences profound isolation despite living in material comfort. The absence of communication between husband and wife reflects the spiritual emptiness of modern marriage. De uses this alienation to explore the psychological consequences of marital breakdown. Karuna's depression, loneliness, and disillusionment mirror the struggles of countless women trapped in unfulfilling relationships. Her gradual withdrawal from her husband's world and pursuit of a career symbolize the process of self-liberation. Freedom, in De's fiction, is not merely the physical act of leaving a marriage but the mental and emotional emancipation from patriarchal control. Karuna's decision to end her marriage marks a radical assertion of agency in a society that stigmatizes divorced women. Her self-reliance challenges the social belief that a woman's worth depends on her marital status. By the end of the novel, Karuna evolves into a self-aware individual who defines her life on her own terms. Her freedom, though achieved through pain and struggle, represents a new model of womanhood—one that prioritizes self-respect over social approval. De's portrayal of Karuna's journey resonates with the feminist ideology that liberation begins with self-awareness and courage to defy societal constraints.

### **Marriage as Social Performance and Symbolism**

In *Socialite Evenings*, marriage operates as a **social performance**—a spectacle designed to maintain the illusion of success. De uses the imagery of parties, fashion shows, and high-society events to symbolize the artificiality of urban life. Relationships are sustained by appearance rather than emotional connection. Karuna's marriage becomes part of this social theater, where her role as a wife is defined by external validation. Her identity is measured by her husband's status, her appearance, and her conformity to social norms. De critiques how patriarchal society turns women into decorative extensions of their husbands rather than independent individuals.

Symbolism plays a crucial role in expressing De's critique. The luxurious homes, glittering parties, and fashionable clothes represent external opulence but internal emptiness. Marriage, in this context, becomes another consumer item—a status symbol that people display rather than cherish. The city of Mumbai itself symbolizes ambition, loneliness, and the breakdown of traditional moral structures. De's use of satire further sharpens this critique. Her tone oscillates between irony and empathy, allowing readers to see both the tragedy and absurdity of modern marital life. Through Karuna's story, De warns that emotional neglect and social hypocrisy can corrode the sanctity of marriage. Yet, she also offers hope through her protagonist's courage to rebuild life independently.

### **Feminist Undertones in De's Portrayal of Marriage**

Shobha De's treatment of marriage is distinctly feminist, though not in a militant sense. She does not advocate the rejection of marriage altogether but calls for equality, mutual respect, and authenticity within it. De's feminism arises from the lived experiences of her characters—

educated, urban women who are aware of their desires yet constrained by gender expectations. Karuna's voice in the novel functions as a form of resistance. Her introspection, confessions, and eventual defiance become tools of reclaiming agency. De's narrative technique—written in the first person—amplifies the female perspective, allowing readers to experience the protagonist's emotions intimately. The novel's feminist essence also lies in its challenge to moral double standards. While men's infidelities are tolerated, women's choices are condemned. De exposes this hypocrisy and asserts a woman's right to emotional and sexual autonomy. Karuna's independence by the novel's end signifies not rebellion for its own sake, but a quest for dignity and self-realization. Thus, De redefines marriage from a feminist viewpoint—as an institution that must evolve from control and conformity to partnership and equality. Through *Socialite Evenings*, she voices the need for redefining gender dynamics in modern Indian society.

### **Social Critique and Contemporary Relevance**

Beyond its feminist implications, *Socialite Evenings* serves as a sociocultural commentary on India's upper-class lifestyle during the late 20th century. The novel reflects the transition of Indian society during the post-liberalization era, when Western values, consumerism, and media influence reshaped relationships. De captures the contradictions of this new India—modern in appearance but traditional in moral expectations. The portrayal of marriage as a fragile institution mirrors the broader crisis of identity faced by urban Indians. As individuals become more career-driven and materialistic, emotional bonds weaken. De highlights this reality through characters who mistake social success for happiness. Her critique remains relevant today, as marital relationships continue to be tested by changing gender roles, economic pressures, and social expectations. De's insight into human psychology is noteworthy. She portrays marriage not only as a social construct but also as an emotional battlefield where love, ego, and insecurity collide. Her nuanced understanding of female psychology allows her to depict women not as victims but as evolving individuals capable of redefining their destiny.

### **Findings**

The analysis of *Socialite Evenings* reveals that Shobha De's portrayal of marriage mirrors the complex and often fractured urban Indian society of the late 20th century. The novel explores the erosion of emotional intimacy in the face of social ambition, materialism, and patriarchal dominance. Through the protagonist, Karuna, De reflects the changing dimensions of marital life where love, companionship, and emotional fulfillment are replaced by convenience, status, and social validation. One of the significant findings is the representation of marriage as a social contract rather than a sacred union. De presents it as an institution governed by societal expectations, not individual choice. Women, particularly from the upper class, appear trapped within the façade of perfect marriages that are emotionally void. Karuna's disillusionment stems from her realization that her husband, while respectable in society, is indifferent to her emotional needs. Another key observation is the theme of female awakening and rebellion. De's women characters, particularly Karuna and Anjali, reject the traditional roles assigned to wives. Their pursuit of individuality and sexual autonomy challenges the male-dominated framework of marriage. However, this rebellion often results in alienation and loneliness, reflecting the social cost of defying conventions. The novel also highlights communication

breakdown as a central cause of marital decay. Emotional isolation, ego clashes, and unfulfilled desires create psychological distance between partners. The characters seek validation through extramarital relationships, social engagements, and professional pursuits, indicating the collapse of traditional marital foundations.

### Conclusion

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* presents a sharp critique of the institution of marriage in urban Indian society. Through Karuna's journey from innocence to awareness, De exposes the emotional emptiness and superficiality underlying many seemingly stable relationships. Marriage, as depicted in the novel, is less about love and companionship and more about maintaining social status, wealth, and power. The novel underscores the duality of modern Indian women—educated and independent yet confined by cultural expectations. De's portrayal of marital relations highlights the silent suffering of women who sacrifice personal happiness for social acceptance. However, by giving her female characters the courage to question and rebel, De paves the way for a discourse on gender equality and emotional fulfillment within marriage. The conclusion reinforces that *Socialite Evenings* is not merely a story about failed marriages but a sociological commentary on the evolving roles of men and women in modern India. It questions the authenticity of marital harmony in a materialistic society where emotional connection is secondary to image and prestige. Shobha De's candid exploration of marriage thus challenges readers to reflect upon the true essence of companionship and the cost of conforming to societal expectations.

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