



VOLTE FACE IN THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF SHOBHA DE'S "SMALL BETRAYALS"

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Abstract:

Indian women are known for various unique virtues. They are modest, dutiful, perseverant, affectionate and orthodox. They used to follow the elders' view. They never tried to question any iniquity meted out to them. They play a crucial role in preserving our culture. Man has dominated woman for ages. Woman is an embodiment of sacrifice and compassion. Now, there is volte face among the Indian women because they do try to become self reliant and rebellious to question any act from men. They seem to ape the occidental culture. Divorce among many Indian married women due to any foible in a husband is a clear example of change of perception in women about men. Pre marital sex among the unmarried youngsters was a taboo in our culture and unethical sex was considered culpable. But now there is the prevalence of uncultured sex among a few young Indians. Presenting raison de etere for such despicable actions is like adding fuel to fire.

This article is a modest attempt to highlight the volte face among the Indian characters that play a major role in the short stories titled "Popcorn", "Elevator" and "The Fair One" in an anthology of short stories. Shobhaa De has made a sincere endeavour to depict the matriarchy in her literary works. In the book "Small Betrayals", the writer has revealed the inevitability of women to get away from the submissive role which women have been known for aeons. In the short story "Popcorn", a married woman is made to desert her husband by his tirade. In the next short story "Elevator", the compassion among rich women to a downtrodden man is perspicuous. A common reader is appreciative of this volte face in women because women should not be made a salve in the name of tradition. So, Mahatma Gandhiji was a ceaseless crusader for the liberation of women and he was highly appreciative of the greatness of women. In the short story entitled "The Fair One", the strained relationship between the couple is expressed.

Introduction:

Generally, Indian women are known for various virtues such as meekness, orthodoxy, timidity, dependence on male, suppression at the hands of men as a part of our culture, perseverance to accept even the despicable iniquity and lack of much self thinking to result in being bridled. Contrary to the commonly held notions, one finds tangible changes in the thoughts and deeds of the present Indian women. Indian women are expected to follow what they are ordered to do but the Indian women have tried to become more independent and self-reliant recently due to various factors such as literacy among women, the prevalence of more easily available media, the change of perception about life and so on. Being a woman writer, Shobhaa De is known for her depiction of the change of perception among the literate women to the typical Indian modus Vivendi. Shobha Rajadhyaksha known as Shobhaa Dé is an Indian columnist and novelist. She graduated from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai with a degree in psychology. After making her name as a model, she began a career in journalism in 1970, during the course of which she became the founder and editor of three magazines – Stardust, Society, and Celebrity.

In the 1980s, she used to share her views with the readers of the Sunday magazine section of the Times of India. In her columns, she always explored the socialite life in Bombay lifestyles of the celebrities. At present, she is a freelance writer and columnist for several newspapers and magazines. De is married to Dilip De, her second husband and they have six children from their first marriages. She lives in Cuffe Parade, Mumbai.

Small Betrayals by Shobhaa De is an anthology of 17 short stories in which the novelist has highlighted the novel thoughts of modern Indian women. One can find an element of matriarchy, compassion, self-reliant woman and so on. In the first story entitled 'Popcorn', the audacity of a wife to get away from a captious husband is pellucid.

A Nitpicking Husband and a Patient Wife in "Popcorn":

Nirad is an obstinate husband. The novelist has addressed Nirad 'an absolute ass' and she has justified the phrase: "Even though Nirad was an absolute ass. Not a bad chap at all. Just an ass. Which in Shyamolee's book, was far worse! A bad chap could become good at some stage. But an ass remained an ass forever. (p.no.10). According to his wife, the people who never try, do not know the meaning of life. Nirad is known for his frequent tirade about his wife. He has criticised his wife for not having gone to market to buy anything which is usually not done by his mother. Shyamolee who buys chicken through home delivery system has been found fault with. He has nit picked his wife again for her act of washing clothes by washing machine which results in the non-removal of dirt on the collar of his shirts. Whenever he grumbles about his wife, he appreciates his mother. When she tries to save the tiny leaf from the heavy rain, she is scolded: "Is the plant more important than the carpet? Throw away that withered plant. Get another one! That silly plant costs a few hundred rupees. My carpet is worth thousands! Crazy woman!" (p.no.15). His spiteful attitude towards his wife has reached ad nauseam, when she has been criticised even for drinking tea during the heavy monsoon season: "What has tea got to do with the weather? It is a bad habit. Like smoking. Like consuming alcohol. Like chewing paan..." (p.no.15)

Finally, it is inevitable for Shyamolee to desert her captitious husband, when she is not able to drink her favorite tea which she has prepared. It seems that Nirad has been green with envy about Shyamolee's candid use of face book which has made her red with anger. He has often ridiculed her for her contact with face book friends. Her answer to her husband's frequent criticism about her face book friends has dumbfounded him in the following dialogue: 'As if those so-called 'friends' can taste what you cooked. How can they say they 'liked' the dish? Shyamolee had replied, 'At least, I got a few 'likes', from people who appreciated my efforts. You tasted it and said nothing at all.' (p.no.10) He whinges his wife even during the conjugal pleasure. He rebukes her for his impotency: "Your position is all wrong....see how you place your legs? (p.no.14) It is pellucid that Nirad is an epitome of a completely domineering husband. His wife is always disdained which has resulted in her separation from her husband.

Pathetic Lift Man and Empathetic Rich Persons in "Elevator":

The second short story "Elevator" depicts the greatness of a member of the subaltern. There is a man called Chhotu who works as a lift man at an apartment in Mumbai. He is known for his 'unkempt appearance'. It is pathetic to state that the residents of an apartment had dehumanised Chhotu. They never had a smidgen of humanity: "... how such a monkey, just down from the trees' could be assigned to elevator duty minus basic training and without any sense of hygiene." (p.no.18) Alisha is

a peculiar lady. She lives on the 23rd floor in an apartment. She gives him a new soap every week but she is certain that the soap is not used by Chhotu. She has come to gauge from the manager that Chhotu is in need of more than one lakh rupees to free his father from a long standing debt. So, he works tirelessly even in two shifts. Through the utterances made by Alisha's friend, the novelist has pointed out the significance of karma in Hindu philosophy: "...in your last life, you accumulated good karma. In his last life, he only picked up bad. He's paying for his. You are enjoying yours." (p.no.19)

Chhotu observes Alisha. Though the lift attendants have been instructed to keep their eyes on the floor, Chhotu identifies Alisha by her perfume. He has got a strange experience of being very close to Alisha at her time, when he has been beckoned. It is unfortunate and miserable that Chhotu's service has been terminated due to his entry into Alisha's home. Chhotu could recollect the similar injustice meted out to him when he was a curious child, he entered a village elder's home to see how it looked like. He was under duress to accept the unjustifiable punishment.

The supervisor of the apartment has berated and warned Chhotu of the dire consequence of being close to the inmates of the apartment: "You are a dirty, filthy, insolent animal. Go back to the jungles of Bihar and stay there.....Last year, when one of the night watchman accidentally brushed past a madam, he disappeared! To this day we don't know what happened to him! These people can do anything" (p.no.22) Chhotu's greatness is apparent through the young man's appreciation of Chhotu and Chhotu's humility. The young man who happened to marry Alisha told the manager that Chhotu could not be sacked because he was very honest unlike other rapacious people who would always expect tips:

Alisha is grateful to Chhotu because the latter is not only very kind but also very helpful. He has rescued Alisha from the men who have been three sheets to the winds and tried to besmirch her image. Chhotu has refused to accept Rs 1000 from the young man and he has apprised the young man of the predicament of working as a liftman. It is obvious: "...But sirji, I am going back to my village. The elevator is too small for me. I feel suffocated inside it. I miss the fields around my village, where I could breathe freely. And sirji, please ask madam to forgive me if I did something wrong." (p.no.24)

Ineluctable Infidel Husband in "The Fair One":

"The Fair one" is Shobhaa De's typical short story. It is the fifth story in her anthology of short stories. It reveals the marital relationship of a middle class couple in Mumbai. Godbole and his wife India had "semi-arranged marriage" fifteen years ago. Both Godbole and Indu were allowed to have conversation with the option to decide on their own about their matrimony. Godbole was not handsome. He was in clover to find womanly beauty in Indu. So, he married her true to the adage "Distance lends enchantment", Godbole was attracted to his neighbor who was a beautiful Parsee woman. The Parsee woman was a late riser. Her husband was a doctor. It is appalling to mention that she never awoke before 9 am because in our country, Indian women especially the married are expected to be up with the lark to discharge their domestic chores dutifully. Godbole visualised the Parsee woman umpteen numbers of times. He saw her preparing for her bath on some days. He seemed crestfallen, when his wife refused to let him into the bathroom to watch her bathe. He criticised God and revealed his chagrin: "Why did such ugly uninteresting man win all the beautiful women? God was most unkind and unfair. (p.no.57)

Despite being the middle level officer in a ministry, Godbole was sanctioned a three bed room flat in a posh area where people were ready to pay lakhs of rupees. So, his colleagues were envious of Godbole. His realization of his over visualization of the

Parsee woman dawned on him: "At this point in his reverie, God bole would force himself to stop. It wasn't good to feel so aroused by a woman who was not your wife. (p.58). The novelist has expressed the inevitable dominance of the male chauvinism even in the arrangement of marriage: "Funny, but even in this day and age, 'the girl's side' had to wait for the 'boy's side to okay the match." (pp 59-60). God bole had mixed opinion about his wife's sharpness which is translucent: "She was quick and fluent on occasions, which made him feel ashamed and proud at the same time. Ashamed because he often underestimated her. Proud that she hadn't let him down in front of colleagues." (p. no 60) So, she was balanced in her approach towards her husband who made him express his views about his wife in a balanced manner.

Godbole could figure out his colleagues who were indifferent to the world. They used to bribe under a table and they used to gossip and live like robots while travelling to office by fast train. They were jealous of Godbole's "big flat in a posh area. Jealous of his nice looking wife who spoke English and jealous of his competence at work" (p. no. 61)

Indu was known for her hyper-active acts. She wanted everything to be done correctly at the perfect time. She did not want her husband to stay for a while after his scheduled departure time at home. It is apparent: 'My entire day gets upset', she added, 'if you don't leave on time. I need the room to be free. Can't you see the sweeper is waiting? If you don't go on time, everything gets delayed.' (p.no 61) She used to call a spade a spade. She never tried to behave like many Indian wives who involve in amorous love affair. Her candid views speak of lack of insinuation in her "Perhaps she had implied that sex was for the lower species, an animal preoccupation. And that any man who indulged in it for reasons other than those of procreation was in some way a pervert, a deviant, a beast. (p. no. 64)... I find all physical contact repulsive. Now that we've had our children... what more is left? (p.no.68)

The novelist has ended the short story with Godbole's happy recollection of his memorable sexual experience with his wife who was very strange on the day. Through this, one can fathom the Indu has gladdened Godbole. God bole's attraction to the Parsee woman is due to lack of amorous love from his wife. The husbands who are considered infidel may be justified because of the absence of both platonic as well as amorous love from the wife. Hence, the Indian women are exhorted to be cock-pecked to make their husband hen-pecked. Godbole perceived, not only about the Parsee woman's pulchritude beauty but also about the strained relationship between the Parsee woman and her husband. This was feasible mainly due to his close observation of the Parsee woman: "He was certain the Fair One was dissatisfied with her husband. They looked mismatched.He'd never heard them exchange a single word. Not a single one. He'd strain his ears hoping to catch a sentence or two, but so far, there had only been silence. It had pleased Godbole. (p. no.66).

Lack of exchange of romance and the attraction of Parsee woman affected Godbole's modus operandi. He reached his office late frequently. "Once in his office, his mind tended to drift a great deal. This was something new. He'd sit staring at the same file for half-an-hour with nothing really registering." (P. no. 66).

Conclusion:

It is clear in the story "Popcorn" that Shyamolee tries to behave like a typical Indian woman in accepting the frequent tirade on her but she has resolved to behave like a typical western woman, when she finds that the constant ignominy from her captious husband is unbearable. Hence, deserting her husband to lead a life which is free from constant nit picking is justifiable, though the act is unorthodox. There is a

perception that the rich women are snobbish but Alisha has been very sympathetic to Chhottu, a very impecunious lift man from Bihar, to dispel the commonly held notion about the women who are born with the silver spoon that there is sympathy or empathy among the rich towards the poor. Lack of physical and mental pleasure from a wife is responsible for a husband to become infidel. This view is accentuated in the short story "The Fair One". In the above stories, the most common feature is the crucial decision to get away from the normal expected manners of stereo-typed Indian women.

References:

1. De, Shobhaa, *Small Betrayals* (Hay House India, New Delhi, 1995)