



# The Impact of Modern Marriage on Women's Morality and Spirituality: A Study through Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings*

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Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL2-JAN26-MD-148

Subject: English

Received : 03.09.2025  
Accepted : 13.10.2025  
Published : 31.01.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si2.26.Jan148

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## Abstract

*Shobhaa De as a writer is gifted with an extra-ordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. The way she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really wonderful. Socialite Evenings, the first novel by Shobhaa De, depicts the upper classes of Mumbai society. It portrays affluent, dissatisfied housewives trapped in unfulfilling marriages and engaging in disastrous affairs outside their marriages. The book also features arrogant, self-absorbed husbands who value their wives more for social status than affection. The narrative includes fashionable gatherings, insincere spiritual guides, and the overall moral, spiritual, and intellectual decline of Mumbai. These elite individuals have abandoned their traditional culture in favor of near-complete westernization, embracing materialism as their sole value system. She brings to light those women in society who are willing to challenge existing one-sided moral standards to establish their own identities.*

**Keywords:** human relationship, marriage, gender bias, betrayal, self-realization, freedom

Shobhaa De possesses a remarkable ability as an author to sensitively explore the most intricate aspects of human life. Her skill in portraying various facets of human interactions, particularly those between men and women, is truly impressive. While she faces criticism from conservative circles in India for her frank discussions of sexual matters, her literary works have garnered significant attention globally, extending beyond just a few European countries. Her writing appeals to readers across all social strata, which is an achievement in itself. In fact, De stands out among other female Indian novelists writing in English. She champions complete transparency and

exceptionally honest reporting of events in her work. She cares least about the opinions of traditional readers regarding the subjects she addresses in her writing.

In the final decades of the 1800s, the concept of the New Woman emerged as a feminist ideal across North America and Europe. This notion challenged the traditional role of women as defined by the Victorian-era Cult of Domesticity. Advocates for this new ideal included novelists, playwrights, journalists, political theorists, and suffragettes, with support also coming from men. The movement aimed to encourage women to break free from patriarchal limitations, take



control of their lives, and eliminate obstacles to their personal growth, happiness, and self-actualization. However, conservatives strongly opposed this ideology, and the New Woman movement began to decline during World War I as women entered the workforce due to a shortage of men and as universal suffrage was achieved shortly after the war.

The New Woman ideal had specific characteristics. She was expected to be well-educated, self-reliant, financially independent, politically engaged, and capable of making her own decisions. Additionally, she was to have the freedom to choose her marriage partner and timing, determine her family size, wear more practical clothing to distinguish herself, and most crucially, challenge social norms and conventions to improve society.

The challenges confronting women in our country differ significantly from those in Western nations. Rural women from the lower middle class, employed in agricultural and industrial sectors, are often uneducated and bound by traditional beliefs. They endure hardships willingly, unaware of the extra burdens placed upon them. The expanding middle class encounters its own set of problems. Despite receiving education and sometimes earning wages, these women haven't experienced substantial improvements in their lives. They struggle to juggle professional responsibilities with domestic obligations. The upper class comprises both aristocrats and newly wealthy individuals, many of whom are first-generation college graduates. This group has an abundance of free time and financial resources, often more than they can effectively manage.

The term "New Woman" was initially coined by Henry James to describe American expatriates working in Europe. Affluent and perceptive women experienced a sense of autonomy and were accustomed to independent action. Sociopolitical and economic factors led to increased awareness among women who took on new roles in social, political, and economic spheres.

*Socialite Evenings*, the first novel by Shobhaa De, depicts the upper echelons of Mumbai society. It portrays affluent, dissatisfied housewives trapped in

unfulfilling marriages and engaging in disastrous affairs outside their marriages. The book also features arrogant, self-absorbed husbands who value their wives more for social status than affection. The narrative includes fashionable gatherings, insincere spiritual guides, and the overall moral, spiritual, and intellectual decline of Mumbai. These elite individuals have abandoned their traditional culture in favor of near-complete westernization, embracing materialism as their sole value system.

The relationship between the quest for identity and the challenge of life has gained popularity among female authors of English-language Indian fiction. In the feminine search for identity, the modern woman is making good progress. She has accumulated enough knowledge from her forebears to be able to call a spade. Although she values tradition, she is more attached to originality and self-respect.

The institutions of marriage and family in the affluent segments of Indian society are depicted in *Socialite Evenings*. Being an inside story, the portrayal is genuine because the writer, who serves as the narrator, is a member of the rich set, which is the novel's main focus. The family is disintegrating and marriage is being redefined in the book's imaginary universe. There is no concept of marital fidelity in the new definition of marriage, which assumes total sexual freedom. The foundation of this marriage arrangement, which seems more like a contract than a dynamic, living, emotional connection, seems to be the wife's financial security. Such marriages, which were formed for practical reasons and lack emotional warmth, frequently fail, resulting in divorce and the severing of family bonds.

The reception of Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings* has been mixed, with some reviewers finding it shocking and others considering it irresistible. The novel is structured as the autobiography of Karuna, a prominent Bombay socialite. Throughout the story, the protagonist evolves from a middle-class girl into a celebrity, while her friends become increasingly neurotic and desperate for male attention. One character, Ritu, is portrayed as attractive and vivacious, having perfected the art of flirtation. She



leaves her second spouse and contemplates a relationship with a smuggler. The male characters in the book include Si, Abe, Girish (an art film director), Krish (an arrogant advertising executive whose wife actively supports his affairs), and Varun (a renowned editor). The narrative revolves around these individuals in a formulaic manner, exposing fraudulent holy men and sexual deviancies.

The protagonist of De's story, Karuna, hails from a traditional Brahmin family that strictly adheres to patriarchal norms. Her father, a stern disciplinarian and authoritarian figure, constantly urged his wife to be tough on their three children. However, it was his youngest daughter's unique traits that particularly exasperated him. Karuna's obstinacy had always posed a significant challenge to his parenting approach. His child-rearing philosophy, which emphasized rigid structure, only served to remind her of strict regimentation. The household allowed little room for leisurely phone chats, eating between meals, unnecessary laughter, or perusing comic books. While the father made all crucial decisions, including academic choices for his children, his authoritarian parenting style proved ineffective with Karuna.

Despite her mother's warnings, Karuna makes the uncommon and unusual choice to model without telling her father. The mother asks her, "...you tell him," even if she "does not have courage to either protect her daughter or challenge her husband." but still she asks her, "...you tell him. Don't involve me. Later he will blame me if anything happens". (SE 12-13) The novelist has thus identified a major shortcoming of women: they lack the bravery to confront a man's unreasonable anger.

Karuna begins seeking experiences outside her home, driven by a growing hunger and quest that "grew greater by the day for it was never fed" (SE 15), possibly due to parental neglect and teacher inattention. She becomes disruptive both at school and home. A combination of profound ignorance and a lack of genuine affection and concern leaves her ill-equipped to make sound decisions or navigate the deceptive world while maintaining her identity.

Consequently, she is often seen wandering confusedly in a modern society where tradition and modernity coexist.

The narrator's friend, Anjali, exemplifies the marriage concept prevalent among the wealthy. The questionable factors influencing her marriage set the tone for her union and others in the novel. Uninterested in academics, Anjali had eagerly sought to escape her middle-class background. As an attractive young woman interested in travel and socializing, she, like other beautiful and intelligent girls of her era, became a flight attendant for Air India. Abe (Abbas Tyabjee) was a "experienced rake with a wild reputation. Something about Anjali's almost frigid demeanor had attracted him. Initially, he had imagined she would be just another quick pick-up. But, by the time they landed in London, Anjali had managed to hook Abe. Or he her." (SE 42)

Karuna observes the disintegration of marriages and relationships with men all around her, including within her own family. Women invariably end up on the losing side, subject to societal demands for perpetual conformity, submission, youthfulness, and attractiveness, while time erodes their appearance, physique, and aspirations. Anjali, after being divorced by Abe, moves from one man to another, experiencing increasing emotional pain until she encounters someone who provides the emotional and financial stability she desires.

Through Karuna's character, De portrays a liberated heroine whose financial independence leads to sexual freedom. However, male dominance, rooted in biological factors, remains a recognized reality. Despite the clamor of feminist movements, women continue to be marginalized. In an interview with The Times of India, Shobhaa De herself acknowledges that neither sex nor money is the primary oppressive factor. She states: "True and lasting liberation is about the evolution of the species. So long inequality rules, there is no hope for real freedom. Female emancipation in such a scenario is doomed to remain where it has been stuck for countries". ('Women's DaySpecial' 2)



The strength of women is greatly enhanced by maternal and nurturing qualities. In traditional societies, motherhood was revered, and mothers held an esteemed position. Within the private realm, a mother played a crucial role in managing her family, while in the public sphere, she extended her influence by sharing her knowledge and wisdom with her spouse and offspring. These feminine attributes can be positively reinforced and bolstered in contemporary societies by ensuring women's financial independence.

In the novel *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna assumes various roles at different times to satisfy her emotional and psychological needs. She transitions between being a model, homemaker, socialite, actor-writer, and lover. While marriage often oppresses and confines women, leading to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose," Karuna represents a new breed of women who defy this norm. Unlike many married women who are limited to their husbands' wishes and desires, Karuna maintains her autonomy. She thinks independently, voices her opinions, and freely chooses her own path in life.

In the novel, the female characters are depicted as attractive, confident individuals who are aware of their strengths and adept at concealing their weaknesses. They find contentment in affluence, material pleasures, and newfound independence. Anjali, for instance, entrusts her teenage daughter to her husband's care, permitting her to engage in discreet sexual relationships. For her spouse, the beautiful young wife serves merely as a status symbol. Karuna, another character, avoids motherhood by seeking an abortion when she becomes pregnant, later discovering her inability to conceive. In her quest for self-identity, she ends her marriage and pursues a career in journalism. While her colleague Ranbir provides entertainment, he is not considered a suitable life partner. Ultimately, Karuna finds herself alone, experiencing loneliness despite her active involvement in *Socialite Evenings*.

Shobhaa De portrays her female characters as empowered individuals striving for women's liberation. She brings to light those women in society

who are willing to challenge existing one-sided moral standards to establish their own identities. The characters of Karuna and Anjali in *Socialite Evenings* exemplify women fighting for individual recognition and equal rights in their community. Through these characters, De addresses and confronts the prevailing power imbalance in society.

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