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ARTICULATIONS OF POWER: FEMALE AGENCY IN SHOBHAA DE'S
"SOCIALITE EVENINGS"

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ABSTRACT

Popular cultural texts have existed as significant sites of interrogation, deriving meaning and relevance in relation to the changing codes and strictures of dominant societal mechanisms and systems. Cultural products provide useful insights regarding the interplay of a wide range of ideas, attitudes and values constituting the ideological framework of society. The complex connotations associated with gendered existence have always informed the production and consumption of popular works of literature and offered newer ways of perceiving and understanding the functioning of power relations within society. The present paper tries to analyse the extent to which popular fiction in India attempts to reflect the complex associations related to gender and identity and provide alternate voices of resistance to the patriarchal formulations of society. Shobhaa De's debut novel *Socialite Evenings* is analysed with the aim of delineating the diverse implications associated with the textual representation of femininity and the feminist ideal of emancipation. The concepts of 'power' feminism and 'victim' feminism propounded by acclaimed feminist Naomi Wolf constitutes the theoretical framework within which the novel is analysed. The purpose is to determine the nature and manner in which the characters of De imbibe the principles of agency and initiative espoused by Wolf.

Keywords: Femininity, power, agency, liberation

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The relationship between power and the ideal of femininity has always been a problematic one as it has been known to incorporate and suggest significant meanings and ideas related to the socio-cultural positioning of the woman. Within the traditional, patriarchal framework of Indian society, the ideological assumptions pertaining to gender have also assumed particular relevance owing to the multitudinous significations it has offered with respect to the gendered status of the Indian woman. Many cultural texts have attempted to reflect upon the complex underpinnings associated with power and hierarchy, trying to negotiate between the conflicting voices emerging from the dominant and subversive elements of culture. The position of women can

indeed be analysed in relation to the underlying system of practices, values and beliefs that are ingeniously manipulated by dominant power-systems to suit the interests of patriarchy.

Voices of resistance and subversion have indeed been articulated through the works of Indian women writers who have directed their creative energies towards exposing the innumerable manifestations of patriarchal hegemony and also towards critiquing the covert mechanisms of cultural control impeding the progress of women in India. Though the contemporary Indian scenario boasts of an array of insightful, enterprising and popular young women writers who have succeeded in integrating the different dimensions of gendered existence in their narratives, it is worth mentioning that the fluidic space of popular literature had very effectively been used much earlier for endorsing some of the most powerful theoretical statements of feminism. The role of Shobhaa De is of crucial importance in this regard, as she gave a very powerful expression to the fundamental problems and issues troubling women in India, particularly emphasising their emotional turmoil and struggles. With a remarkable frankness of perception, she tried to capture the inner workings of the female mind, strongly protesting against the concerted attempts made by patriarchy to silence the voice of the woman. What is even more notable is the conscious attempt that she makes to provide her female protagonists with a sense of agency that enables them to affirm their own selves and seek alternate channels for their own liberation and progress.

The present paper focuses on the manner in which De strives to deconstruct some of the prevailing myths and suppositions framed around Indian womanhood through the creation of powerful and independent women characters who challenge the male social order. The dominant image of the resilient female self that comes through her works connotes a diverse range of emotions that necessarily rely on an assumption of 'power' inherent within each individual woman. More than the aspect of marginalisation or subjugation, what comes to the fore is the idea of the Indian woman as not an adjunct of the male, but as one who enjoys a fierce sense of personal independence and freedom. Though De primarily concentrates on urban Indian women who belong to the upper strata of society, her representations of women's experiences and concerns reach beyond mere class specific or region-based affiliations and try to attain a universal significance with regard to the predicament of the woman.

An attempt has been made here to analyse her novel *Socialite Evenings* specifically in terms of its striking portrayal of the changing perspectives and conflicts affecting the modern, progressive Indian woman. De offers a renewed understanding of women's relation to and confrontations with the complex assumptions of modernity and tradition and also commends the endeavours of women who are willing to experiment with their own lives, by engaging in fruitful and meaningful processes of self-discovery. It is within such contexts of self-recognition and individual fulfillment that she tries to locate the notion of 'power', firmly placing it in opposition to the entrapments of victimhood and subjugation.

Questions on power and powerlessness have indeed been crucial points of discussion within the context of feminist interrogations carried out around the politics of gender relationships within society. Theoreticians such as Naomi Wolf have tried to uphold the need for women to initiate change by recognising their own power, rights and authority instead of remaining conditioned to a notion of perpetual helplessness and oppression at the hands of the male. In her seminal work *Fire With Fire* she elaborates upon the need for re-fashioning female identities by urging women to refrain from identifying themselves as mere victims who are incapable and weak. She expresses her faith in women's ability to come out of the perennial image of the 'wronged' and to start recognising their innate potential for positive action. She holds that women should be ready to seize upon the opportunities available for self-expression and emerge as competent individuals who enthusiastically pursue their dreams and aspirations. She also maintains that the very status and position of the woman within contemporary times has undergone a paradigm shift, signaling a marked deviation from conceptions about femininity that existed in the past years of feminist activism. The observation that she makes at the very beginning of this acclaimed work very well indicates her awareness of the significant transformations taking place within the field of women's political participation. She says: "The 1980s were the height of the backlash years, but from the autumn of 1991 to the present, a new era has begun- the era of the

'genderquake', in which the meaning of being a woman is changed for ever" (*Fire With Fire*). She also clearly distinguishes between two versions of feminism, namely 'victim' feminism and 'power' feminism, strongly advocating the latter as the most agreeable and gratifying approach that can evolve in the present circumstances. She argues against some of the dominant assumptions about female victimisation, which she feels have largely become outdated, and instead validates the faithful venting out of women's natural impulses and urges as liberatory for women. She thus envisages an idea of independence that is closely aligned with women's exercise of power and initiative – a view that emphasises the woman's individual will more than any form of exploitation or marginalisation to which women are subject to by the male. She therefore emphatically asserts that by retrieving the "wild child- the inner *bad girl*" it is possible for women to "embrace those qualities of leadership and sexual self-possession, and the solid sense of entitlement that we are conditioned to disavow in ourselves, and to resent in other women" (*Fire With Fire*).

Taking cue from Wolf's concept of 'power' feminism and its concomitant suggestions about women's strength and individuality, it would be interesting to examine De's novel *Socialite Evenings* in the light of the insights derived from Wolf's arguments regarding feminist goals and aims. Though the novel traces the life of Karuna, who is the central female character, it offers a very engrossing account of the dilemmas, the anxieties and the battles of rich, upper class women who lead liberated, uninhibited lives as the much sought after socialites of Bombay high society. Each important woman character that De presents, apart from the protagonist Karuna, appear as representational figures who are, however, subtly differentiated by their unique individualities. Therefore, even when these female characters exist as types, they endeavour to communicate intense personal emotions and conditions such as alienation, loss, rejection, longing and fulfillment. What deserves mention is the manner in which these women refuse to be subdued by patriarchal dominance and succeed in creating a space for themselves, journeying through instances and experiences of self-realisation and emancipation. They are not submissive individuals who bow down before the pressures of conformity, but rather confident and bold women who have no qualms about rebelling openly against the system. They display courage, recognise their own inner worth and affirm their position as strong-willed, self-assured individuals who are powerful enough to confront the authoritarian forces of society.

When seen in relation to Naomi Wolf's theoretical formulations that have just been discussed, they are not 'victims' but determined and assertive women who attain a sense of completion and contentment not by adhering to the conventional image of a pure, virginal and essentially good Indian woman, but by listening to their own inner voices and ambitions. What they cherish more is a sense of individual freedom and autonomy which may be attained not by revolting against the male but by looking into their own selves and comprehending what they are inherently capable of. These women, therefore, come across as practical, ingenious and successful, rather than as vulnerable and incapacitated.

Karuna, who is born into a traditional middle-class family resents her conservative upbringing and is filled with a burning desire to rebel against her situation right from her childhood. She labours to evolve out of her restricted background and the small acts of rebellion that she indulges in, right from her school days, are desperate attempts made by her to give space to her own youthful passions and cravings. Though she is aware that she would defy the strong moral principles upheld by her parents and family, she sets aside such feelings to go after that which she truly likes. Her stint in modeling explicates this facet of her personality and also indicates her strong desire to free herself of the pretensions of societal decorum. Her friendship with Anjali, a prominent socialite, takes her one step further into the world of the elite, the liberal world of the rich and the famous. The experiences that she thus shares with Anjali, not just familiarise her with an unfamiliar sphere of life, but also prepare her for a more appealing and exciting foray into the world of challenges and pleasures. When she gets married, without much thought to a wealthy businessman, she is suddenly transported to a life of boredom and isolation, struggling to communicate with her husband. She painfully realises the lack of understanding and warmth in their marriage, but tries to endure her agony like a dutiful wife. Though her inner turmoil may be interpreted as emerging from the conflict that she experiences as a result of the oppositional voices of tradition and modernity that she holds within herself, it cannot be denied that she is

also being practical and analytical about her own predicament. She is perfectly aware of the safety and security offered through marriage and appears to be reluctant to do away with it completely. However, she finds avenues for realising her creative urges and gets involved with theatre and also simultaneously with Krish, a friend of her husband.

Her affair with Krish offers her a sense of emotional satisfaction and she finds herself deliriously happy in his presence. She is indeed conscious of the consequences of committing adultery, but is firm about her stand when her husband gets to know of it. When she finally leaves her husband following the threat of divorce raised by him, she refuses to give up, though stripped off the social as well as economic security offered by him. She engages herself in a number of minor job-related activities, mostly centering on theatre, television and advertisements, desperately trying to build a new life for herself. She slowly widens her creative horizon and starts a career as a theatre actress which also brings her close to an art-filmmaker who wishes to make her his wife. However, she rejects his advances, as she is now confident about her freedom and is also eager to explore life as she wills. Her proclamation that a woman's security does not rest with a man can be taken as a strong indication of her having finally come to terms with the conditions of her life, having realised the artificiality of boundaries fixed for women within society. She climbs up the ladder of success, graduating from writing to making ad films and also to scripting a major television serial. When she is offered the proposal of being part of a documentary on urban Indian women by her ambitious friend Ranbir from Washington, she once again displays her unique stance and independent outlook by announcing that her decision is to use that idea not for a documentary but rather for a book. When the novel comes to a close with this declaration of Karuna, it appears to be not an end but rather the beginning of a new, vibrant life built upon an edifice of incessant creative activity. Thus the novel concludes by asserting the woman's right to live, free of compulsions, totally in control her own life and aspirations, desirous of a meaningful existence sans boundaries.

The idea of female power that the novel puts forward necessarily connects to Wolf's understanding of the 'empowered' woman who is ready to act rather than silently endure. The novel's commercial success also stands testimony to the fact that popular works of fiction could in fact produce female models who epitomise the version of 'power' feminism espoused by feminists such as Wolf. Since popular media plays a significant role in propagating messages and ideas about womanhood, such alternate images and representations of women's power assume particular significance, especially in the context of rampant stereotyping of women as victims through popular cultural texts. Equally relevant is the fact of women's creative independence being recognised as a significant dimension of women's freedom, for, creativity is not just empowering or liberatory for the character Karuna but also for De herself who uses it as a medium for expressing her own intense feelings and emotions, this aspect becoming apparent when seeking autobiographical parallels between the author's own life and that of her protagonist.

Even though the present paper focuses on the central protagonist Karuna, it has to be added that De constructs a notion of female independence and liberation that is predicated on the different manifestations of personal freedom exemplified through supporting characters such as Anjali and Ritu, who constitute the friendship circle of Karuna. Both these women exhibit a certain amount of sexual freedom and seek to fulfill their emotional and physical needs, never letting themselves feel oppressed by their circumstances. Even when Anjali divorces her husband Abe, gets entangled in a series of relationships and finally gets married to a gay businessman, she never brings herself down to feel helpless and passive, but rather maintains composure of mind and moves forward without faltering. She enters into business with the financial security provided by her husband. However, this does not in any way make her feel less important than her husband. Ritu too steers clear of all her troubles or rather misadventures, reinvents herself in the process without buckling under pressure and returns to her husband. These women thus present a different face of changing India and also reflect the evolving cultural ideas about women and power. From being socially constructed as passive appendages to the male, modern Indian women have moved forward, wielding tremendous power over their own lives and destinies, celebrating a strong sense of individualism. Though this is a proposition that cannot be

understood in generalised terms, the noteworthy fact is that popular fiction, which enjoys the benefit of being well-liked and widely read, contains the potential to faithfully reflect existing meanings and ideas about womanhood and also to generate even more influential and transformative ideas about women's progress.

The remarkable women characters created by Shobhaa De in *Socialite Evenings* negotiate between the varying demands and trappings of their cultural roles, but never appear to lose themselves or their identities in the process. On the other hand, they emerge as "modern iconic strong women" who are "exemplars of 'power feminism'" (Hains 89). Thus power may not be considered as existing within the domain of the male, monopolised by patriarchal structures, but rather as manifesting itself in the diverse contexts of self-recognition and mutual identification realised by women, for as Wolf notes, 'power' feminism "encourages us to identify with one another primarily through the shared pleasures and strengths of femaleness, rather than primarily through our shared vulnerability and pain" (*Fire With Fire*).

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