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Changing Ideologies of Marriage in Contemporary Indian Women's Novels

By Bhushan Sharma¹

Abstract

Marriage in Hinduism is sacramental in nature and considered a divine religious bond. As per *Shastras*, man alone is incomplete until or unless he marries. The wife is called *Ardhangini* (half of man) or *dharmapatni*, who shares religious duties with her husband. This paper views matrimony from a feminist lens and explores the changing ideology of marriage by drawing upon feminist theory. The study uses two novels by contemporary Indian women writers, Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* (1996), to explore the world of married women. These novels by Indian women express women's viewpoints about their experiences of precarity and suffering, the subjugated world of limited choices, and conflict in married life. They extend their deep psychological insight and understanding of the husband-wife relationship. Disrupting the sacred relation of husband and wife, the husband often occupies a position similar to that of a master, while the wife is akin to a servant. Deshpande portrays three generations of common middle-class Indian women, who endure a subservient role in their marital life and struggle to adjust rather than break free from the traditional world. Shobhaa De, the spokesperson of the urban women in her novel, focuses on infidelity in the institution of marriage, a tale of love and betrayal that surfaces the hollowness and hypocrisy lurking behind Indian traditional marriages. The texts reveal that women are subservient partners in traditional Indian marriages, alienating disadvantaged women from their husbands or leading them to revolt against the social system and even reject the institution of marriage entirely.

Keywords: Indian women's literature, Matrimony, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Transformation, Revolt, Shashi Deshpande, *A Matter of Time*, Shobhaa De, *Second Thoughts*

Introduction

Hindi marriage is not an idealistic exchange of garlands or a celebration of dancing, food, and drink—it is about two people promising each other and their communities they will lead a conjugal life. The Hindi term for marriage is *vivah* and represents one of the most important and oldest institutions, particularly in Hinduism, which describes the socially acknowledged and approved sexual union between two adult individuals. According to the Hindu religion, marriage is the holy union of two souls and bodies and is regarded as one of the ten most important *sanskaras* (sacraments). Hindu marriage is a religious injunction intended to fulfill religious duties and attain *Purushartha*, meaning to achieve the four goals of life: *Dharma* (righteousness, moral values), *Artha* (prosperity, economic values), *Kama* (pleasure, love, psychological values), and *Moksha* (liberation, spiritual values, self-actualization).

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According to the *Vedas*² and *Shastras*,³ marriage in Hinduism is sacramental in nature, as it is considered a divine, religious bond. The wife is called *ardhangini*, meaning half of the man. As per *Shastras*, a man alone is only half of a whole until or unless he marries. Marriage is obligatory for the Hindus for procreation, mainly to beget a son to discharge their debt towards their ancestors by offering them *Pindas*⁴ and for performing religious and spiritual duties. Hence, the wife is also called a *dharmapatni*, meaning one who shares religious duties with her husband. Above all, the sacramental nature of Hindu marriage, or the heterosexual union of man and woman, implies that it is a permanent bond that does not end with the death of the partner but continues in the next life.⁵ Thus, traditional Hindu marriage has no space for divorce. Once the marriage ceremony is performed, it cannot be dissolved. The marital relationship is tied not on account of any contract but through certain religious ceremonies that include the rituals of *Satapadi*⁶ and *Kanyadaan*.⁷

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 contains provisions that relate marriage to a contractual agreement. Naturally, the changing times have influenced society as a whole, including the environmental, economic, and living conditions of individuals and families. As a result, the ideology of marriage is also changing. What was once considered the most compassionate relationship is becoming more complicated. In ancient times, men were at war with nature, then with society, and finally with the most complementary relation—the spouse. Just as Hindi men's worlds have evolved, so have Hindi women's worlds and perspectives. Women novelists in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature⁸ have developed their style, which expresses women's viewpoints to explore and contemplate the world of their marriage experiences.

This paper applies a feminist lens to explore how contemporary Indian women writers delineate the changing ideology of marriage and its complexities as influenced by the evolving local and global socio-cultural milieu. Drawing upon feminist theories of marriage delineated by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Sheila Cronan's "Marriage" in *Radical Feminism* (1973), and others, the researcher explores two novels by Indian women writers. Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (also referred to as *Time*) and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* serve as research tools to explore the matrimonial world of women. These novels depict women's precarity and subjugation, and the control of women under the ideology of good women and devoted wives. This paper asserts that heterosexual relationships between men and women in Hindi matrimony parallel the negative relationships of the master and the servant. But while traditional Hindi women silently endured these sufferings, the new generation has begun to reject this institution. These

² The *Vedas* are the oldest Hindu sacred texts. The underlying philosophy or teaching of the *Vedas* is the concept that the individual is not an independent entity but rather a part of the Universal Consciousness.

³ In late and post-Vedic literature of Hinduism, *Shastras* refers to any treatise, book, or instrument of teaching, any manual or compendium on any subject in any field of knowledge, including religion.

⁴ *Pindas* are balls of cooked rice mixed with ghee and black sesame seeds offered to ancestors during Hindu funeral rites (*Antyesti*) and ancestor worship (*Śrāddha*). According to traditions in the *Garuda Puran*, offering a *pinda* to a recently departed soul helps to unite the soul with its ancestors.

⁵ Hindus believe in the philosophy of rebirth, i.e., that life continues after death, and humans all go through cycles of rebirth.

⁶ *Satapadi* refers to the practice of the bridegroom and the bride taking seven circles around the sacred fire. The marriage becomes complete and binding when the seventh round is over.

⁷ *Kanyadaan*, meaning "giving away the bride" in Sanskrit, is a symbolic marriage ritual for the bride's parents and the couple. The Father of the bride takes his daughter's right hand and places it in the groom's right hand, requesting him to accept his daughter as his equal partner. The ritual signifies both the acceptance of the bride's father and his official approval to give his daughter away.

⁸ The phrase Indo-Anglian literature refers to the contribution of Indian writers to English-language literature. In terms of content, Indo-Anglian literature is similar to Indian literature.

psychological and feminist evolutions surface in writings by contemporary Indo-Anglian women writers who design characters that express cultural displacement and enact social transformation.

Select Contemporary Indian Women's Novels

This paper explores Shashi Deshpande's *Time* and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* to illustrate women's perspectives on marriage and their changing ideologies. For Deshpande, writing does not come as a conscious decision whereas Shobhaa De describes herself as an obsessive-compulsive writer, columnist, commentator, and author. Deshpande was born in 1936 in Karnataka, South India. Her father, R. V. Jagirdar was a renowned Sanskrit scholar, novelist, actor, and dramatist. She received a BA with honors and attained a degree in Law. In 1962 she married medical doctor D. H. Deshpande. After becoming a mother of two sons, she studied journalism and earned a Master of Arts. She also went to England with her husband and children, where she was trapped at home caring for her children, had no friends, and felt suffocated and alienated. On returning to India, her husband encouraged her to write about this experience. Her first short story "The Legacy" was published in 1972, and she went on to write thirteen novels. Today, Shashi Deshpande is regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary women writers in English and is a recipient of the 1990 Sahitya Akademi Award⁹ for her novel *That Long Silence* and the 2009 Padma Shri Award.¹⁰ Deshpande's writings show her concern for women. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Her novels express the problems of adjustment and conflicts in the minds of the female protagonists, ultimately portraying their struggles with submitting to traditional roles during this era of evolution in Hindi matrimony.

Shobha De was born in 1948 in Maharashtra, India. She earned a degree in psychology, worked as a fashion model, and then switched to a career in journalism. De offered her editorial skills to renowned magazines like *Stardust*, *Celebrity*, and *Society*. She has also written scripts for Indian television soaps, such as India's first-ever soap *Swabhimaan*. Subsequently, she directed her attention toward literary writing and authored fifteen books, seven of which are novels. Popularly known as India's "Jackie Collins," Shobha De is one of the top bestselling authors in India (Fineman). Her individualistic, provocative, and bold writing style has infused a breath of freshness in Indian literature. De's novels—*Socialite Evenings* (1988), *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996)—all focus on women's issues of urban and/or ultra-modern society, where the glitz and glamour of the character's worlds are offset by their complicated relationships and marriages.

The author herself has married twice and is the mother of six children, including two stepchildren. De's book, *Spouse—The Truth About Marriage* (2015) surveys the institution of marriage in urban society. Her novels realistically present an insight into urban women's lives and reveal their plight in present-day society. She has portrayed marginalized, subjugated, and domesticated women in her novels and emphasizes incompatible marriages, traditional norms of behavior, and a patriarchal social system that oppresses and exploits women. Her novels reveal the emptiness of the marital relationships of the higher class and offer a candid portrayal of character's sex lives. De is a bold writer who dares to unearth the issues never mentioned in public by any woman writer, such as heterosexual relationships, lesbian and homosexual relationships, the physical needs of women, and the emergence of live-in non-marital

⁹ A literary honor in India, which the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, annually confers on writers of the most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the major Indian languages.

¹⁰ The fourth-highest civilian award of the Republic of India, after the Bharat Ratna, the Padma Vibhushan, and the Padma Bhushan.

relationships. Through her novels, she makes her readers contemplate the characters' fast-waning faith, love, and satisfaction in marital relations. The author asks, "Why has the C-word (commitment) disappeared from relationships?" (*Spouse* xii). A thoughtful reading of her novels shows her sensitivity and concern for women and her creation of powerful women characters.

The Ideology of Marriage in *A Matter of Time*

The novel *A Matter of Time* (referred to hereafter as *Time*) explores the intricate relationships within an extended family and encompasses different generations of women residing in present-day Karnataka, India. A penetrating study of the novel depicts a society in transition with the portrayal of different facets and changing ideologies of marriage. At the center of the novel is eighteen-year-old Aru, who struggles to understand the ideology behind traditional Hindu marriages. The text reveals a comprehensive picture of four generations of Indian women from middle-class families who have different educational and economic statuses.

Manorama represents the first generation, comes from a humble background, and is married to the rich Vithalrao. After getting married, she breaks all ties with her family members except her younger brother Shripati. As Deshpande writes:

She deprived herself of that emotional sustenance that only a girl's family gives her. The songs, the stories, and the legends that have sprung up around women's mothers' homes as a fountainhead of love and caring grew out of reality: a woman's need for love that took account of a person, not as a figure fitting into a role (Deshpande 120).

As de Beauvoir has written about in her work, Manorama is torn away from her family and finds only disappointment on the day after her wedding. Deshpande also points out various inequalities between a wife and husband who find themselves in a tiresome relationship, passing the time not in love but in conjugal duties. Simone de Beauvoir similarly points out that marriage has a different meaning for men and women: "... the act of love is, as we have seen, a service rendered to the man; he takes his pleasure and owes her some payment. The woman's body is something he buys" (de Beauvoir 420). In marrying, a woman gets some share in the world as her own; the law guarantees her protection against capricious actions by men but she becomes his vassal. Men are the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence represent it in the view of society. A wife takes on her husband's name, religion, class, circle, and joins his family. She becomes his other "half" (de Beauvoir 418-19). Then children, primarily the birth of a son, provide her respect and security.

Manorama feels insecure as she fails to give a male heir to the family. The thought that Vithalrao might marry again to have a son torments her. She knows that a husband is traditionally allowed to leave his wife if she cannot give birth to a male heir. Traditional Hindu marriage is for procreation and to beget a son to discharge their debt towards their ancestors by performing set religious and spiritual duties. The fear of not having a son affects Manorama psychologically, and she cannot establish a healthy relationship with her daughter Kalyani.

Through the portrayal of the second generation, Kalyani and Shripati, Deshpande depicts a forced, incompatible arranged marriage in which a woman has to suffer endlessly, experiencing "the hopelessness that lay within the relationship that doomed it from the start" (143). Kalyani has average looks, but Manorama wants Kalyani to be beautiful so that she can find a better match for her. A girl's appearance is an important consideration in match-making. Shobha De also underlines this in *Second Thoughts* when Chitra tries to make her daughter Maya look fairer. Both Chitra and Manorama present their daughters as commodities, do not allow them to complete their studies, and force them to marry.

Kalyani is married to Shripati, her uncle, who is also forced to enter into a loveless marital bond as a sense of gratitude to his wealthy sister Manorama. This marriage is not the union of two souls or bodies but a sentry of family property. Deshpande writes, "Perhaps, after this [marriage], Manorma felt secure. The property would remain in the family now" (129).¹¹ The marriage within a blood relation gives them an intellectually disabled son and immense suffering. The relationship between Kalyani and Shripati remains miserable throughout the novel because of the long silence emerging from their loss and agony. Kalyani loses their son at the railway station and Shripati never forgives her for the loss of their male child. She returns home as a destitute wife and since then Shripati, "for the last thirty-five years, never spoke to Kalyani" (Deshpande 142). Thus, the loss of a son creates an emptiness between Kalyani and Shripati leading to dismay, hopelessness, anger, hatred, and silence loud enough to engulf every conversation. They live like strangers under the same roof. Her daughter Sumi questions this kind of existence, "Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind that he has not spoken to you for decades?" (Deshpande 167). Thus, the novel illustrates a conservative society where marriage and begetting a son are the only things that matter.

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society, making it the be-all and end-all of women's existence. Society has been so structured that there is no alternative to marriage for women (Cronan 217). Hence, Kalyani considers her situation better than widows. She believes, "What is a woman without her husband?" (Deshpande 167). Hence, despite all injustice and suffering, Kalyani moans bitterly about the death of Shripati. Through the character of Kalyani, Shashi Deshpande gives voice to many women who endure their oppression silently. The author traces the need for women to tell, relate, and end the silence heaped on them through centuries of social conditioning leading to their self-effacement in the requirement to be a "good woman." Indira J. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg also state, "A woman rarely talks of herself. In normal circumstances, she talks only about her role, her family, and the traditions of society. She may talk of her reactions once in a while, but she keeps her real feelings hidden" (34). If she does not follow these expectations, she is not considered a good woman.

Deshpande's portrayal of the third-generation matrimony, the relationship between Sumi and Gopal, is more bewildering. Though Sumi has a love marriage with Gopal, they set limitations to maintain their freedom, "When Gopal and Sumi had decided to get married, it was agreed upon that if either of the two wanted to be free, he or she would be left to go. They were not going to be tied together" (Deshpande 221). Their early marital life is blissful with a relationship based on love and understanding, yet eventually it fails. A caring and compassionate husband, Gopal, after twenty-three years of marriage and raising three daughters with Sumi, begins to feel some inner emptiness for reasons even he could not articulate. He feels, "Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes—a lifetime of commitment—it is not possible for all of us" (Deshpande 69). Gopal walks out of the matrimonial bond and Sumi returns with her three daughters (Aru, Charu, and Seema) to the shelter of the "Big House," where her parents, Kalyani and Shripati, live in strange, oppressive silence. Though Kalyani survives Shripati's exploitation and Manorma's myriad acts of cruelty, she is devastated when she comes to know about the desertion of Sumi, "No, no, my God not again" (Deshpande 12). But Sumi endures the vacuum created by Gopal's absence stoically. Unlike her earlier counterparts, such as Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*; she does not opt to run away from difficulties and instead decides to confront life as it comes her way. In the book *The Changing Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*, the literary critic H. Ranjita states:

¹¹ In traditional India, the family property is recorded in men's names.

Sumi does not compromise as an individual. She neither interferes with others' decisions and individual space, not even with her husband's decision to leave her and his family life for good, nor does she let others interfere with her in any way. She bears all the sufferings and uncertainties of life stoically and still maintains her individual self and independence (Ranjita 145).

Sumi reflects on her marriage with maturity and recognizes that Gopal's concept of life was different from hers, "If we travel together for a while, that's only a coincidence" (Deshpande 212). She makes peace with herself and allows Gopal to have his own space, which she calls *sannyas* (renunciation). Thus, she frees him from the bondage of matrimony. She also rejects Aru's proposal to file a case demanding compensation from him: "Let him go, Aru, just let him go. It is not good for you" (Deshpande 61). Through the portrayal of Sumi's life, Deshpande questions the tradition which permits a husband to abandon his responsibility as a householder but does not permit a wife to do so. A wife must bear it all either silently or through her transformation. Episodes from Indian history and mythology bear witness to men who were venerated for their selflessness while no thought was given to the silent suffering and martyrdom of their wives. Hailed for spurning the luxury and comfort of princely life in pursuit of knowledge, Siddhartha was later recognized as Buddha. Lakshmana's steadfastness and devotion find no parallel in Indian mythology, while their respective spouses Yashodhara and Urmil remain shadowy figures in the background, doomed to live a life of anonymity. Simone de Beauvoir also argues about the treatment of women as the "second sex," stating that "But woman is not called upon to build a better world; her domain is fixed and she has only to keep up the never-ending struggle against the evil principles that creeps into it; in her war against dust, stains, mud, and dirt she is fighting sin, wrestling with Satan" (438). Women in India have very limited choices. They cannot choose to become a *sanyasi*/hermit, remain single, or focus on themselves. In a patriarchal society, it is the man who takes the woman. De Beauvoir notes that men deny women liberty reserved for men, but without liberty there can be neither love nor individuality. The husband must be a productive worker while the wife is restricted to the tasks of continuation of the species and the care of the home. Sumi also completely devotes herself to her family. And after her desertion, she does not question Gopal and remains silent, which makes his desertion easier on him.

Sumi does not break but instead transforms herself. Despite her desolation, Sumi appears stoic. She shows resilience, becomes emotionally strong, and emerges as a new woman who can live her life on her own terms. At the age of 40 she creates her identity, realizes her autonomy, and asserts her selfhood. After Gopal's disappearance, Sumi transforms and engages herself in creative activities like gardening, teaching, learning to drive a scooter, and writing plays. She focuses on enhancing her creative output and writes a play, "The Gardener's Son," for a school function. Encouraged by her play's success, she decides to rewrite the story of Surpanakha in *The Ramayana* from a feminist perspective: "Female sexuality. We're ashamed of owning it... But Surpanakha... neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it—it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about" (Deshpande 191). Sumi's re-writing of Surpanakha's story shows her modern attitude. Thus, the overall picture represented by the novel ensures us a fresh pioneering of life: "Nothing is over, things keep coming back over and over again, they are all connected" (Deshpande 219). Prof. K. M. Thakkar explains, "Shashi Deshpande tries to bring out the idea of a woman explicating herself and emerging out of the cocoon of self-pity to spread her wings of self-confidence" (154). Women are victims of a false belief system that requires them to find identity and meaning in their lives through their husbands and children. Such a system causes women to completely lose their identity in that of their family (Friedan). Thus, the ideology of marriage is primarily

repressive for women and the onus lies on women to shun the self-effacing requirements for being the ideal wife, woman, or mother.

Aru, the eldest daughter of Sumi and Gopal, represents the new generation. She feels that walking away from her father is “not just a tragedy” but “a shame and a disgrace” (Deshpande 13). Aru began to see “A new dimension of betrayal and cruelty in the man-woman relationship” and “a victim in every woman, a betrayer in every man” (Deshpande 145, 144). She is also horrified at Premi's story about the pregnant wife of her AIDS patient, who is aware of his condition yet marries so that he would have someone to look after him. Above all, the sight of her grandmother fills her with indignation, a sense of pity, and enormous waste. Aru decides, “I am never going to get married” (76). De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that marriage almost always destroys a woman. Quoting from the diary of Sophia Tolstoy,¹² she further asserts that you are stuck there forever and there you must sit. Aru also realizes the emptiness of the institution of marriage, the most important happening in the life of women of the older generation. Marriage does not have a place in Aru's scheme of things as she declares not to marry.

The Ideology of Marriage in *Second Thoughts*

On the surface, Shobhaa De's seventh book, *Thoughts* (1996), presents an “explosive tale of love and betrayal” according to the cover page advertisement, yet on a deeper level, the novel depicts the hollowness and hypocrisy lurking behind Indian traditional marriages. Maya and Ranjan enter an arranged wedlock, not based on love, compatibility, or compassion but instead on opportunity. The very foundation of Maya's marriage with Ranjan and most arranged marriages is hollow. As discussed above, the marriage between Kalyani and Shripati is a sentry of family property and Maya's and Ranjan's is a pure contract of opportunity. Ranjan marries Maya to satisfy his mother and Maya marries him to get away from Calcutta. The only good part of getting married for Maya is to become a part of the city of Bombay, whose spell she has fallen under so quickly. She finds herself falling inexorably in love with glittering, menacingly intimidating Bombay. De uses her Maya's name as a symbol, as the word *Maya* means fantasy, a realm of imagination, or an illusion. The marriage is arranged and Maya's maternal uncle initiates the proposal. At his urging, Maya and her mother decide to come to Bombay and meet Ranjan Malik and his mother. Maya initially protests against this marriage proposal because she had not finished college yet. Yet her mother compels her as she feels, “Boys like Ranjan get snapped up before the blink of an eye...Ranjan is quite a catch. Who knows, by the time we get to Bombay, some other lucky girl might have grabbed him” (*Second Thoughts* 4). Ranjan had interviewed ninety-nine girls and rejected all of them. Hence, this matrimony was merely an opportunity to grab him quickly, so Maya and her mother rush to Bombay to meet the boy.

In an arranged marriage, a woman is considered a commodity. Though the world has changed a lot over time, it is difficult to change customs in India that picture women as dolls in the market. Chitra (Maya's mother) makes all efforts to present Maya attractively as she buys her a yellow saree to make her appear more fair-skinned. Maya's preferences and healthy self-image are simply overlooked:

Maya liked her skin tone: a warm, rich golden brown like sunlight dancing on the Hoogly that offset her gleaming jet-black hair and large, dark eyes to advantage. She was an attractive young lady—and never mind the complexion. A few shades here and there didn't make any difference, not to her (*Second Thoughts* 6).

¹² Tolstoya was pregnant 16 times, and three of her pregnancies ended in miscarriages. The Tolstoy had 13 children, eight of whom survived childhood. With the growing interest of her husband in spiritual matters, Tolstoya took over the running of the family estate and editing his manuscripts.

In a conservative society with traditional matchmaking, fairer skin denotes a higher level of prosperity, class, and upbringing. Chitra (Maya's mother) says, "A dark person rarely looks wealthy, well-fed, or happy. To be born dark is to be condemned for life!" (*Second Thoughts* 6). In a patriarchal society, this sometimes has serious consequences for women during matchmaking because they are presented as commodities and not autonomous beings. Shashi Deshpande also presents the same ideology in *The Matter of Time* when Manorma wants Kalyani to be beautiful so that she can find a better match for her. Similarly, Chitra gets panicky at the last moment about the looks of Maya, "Oh! God, your *kajal*...it's looking terrible...Dark, dark rings. What will they think?" (*Second Thoughts* 8).

The arranged Indian marriage is not between two individuals but two families. The women and their families have little or no say in the process. At the very beginning, Ranjan rejects Maya's choice of taking up a job or even engaging in small creative activities and says, "Our relatives will criticize us and my mother won't like it if you suddenly take up a job. It's not done. They might think I don't earn enough. Or that I am forcing you to contribute towards household expenses" (*Second Thoughts* 40). Hurt and dejected, Maya is silenced by her mother and forced into a wedlock that has a hollow basis. As a result, Maya's marriage begins her tale of pain, agony, and silent suffering. Ranjan turns out to be a mama's boy who always directs Maya to follow in his mother's footsteps, "If you have a problem understanding things just ask me. And I'll ask my mother," "If you need company, call my mother," "If you want to go anywhere, ask my mother to accompany you" (*Second Thoughts* 56, 79, 27). Ranjan's relationship with his mother did not allow for any kind of bonding between the spouses. Further, Ranjan lacks any physical attraction toward his newlywed wife and does not attempt to make an intimate relationship with her. Yet, he does not seem either frustrated or unhappy. Maya's sexual overtures also fail. She says:

Shyly, I had tried snuggling up to him and caressing him one night as we lay in bed, but Ranjan had recoiled—jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He had lain trembling in bed for a long time, his breathing heavy, his eyes screwed shut. 'Stop behaving like a cheap woman. A prostitute,' he had muttered before turning around and going to sleep (*Second Thoughts* 362).

Maya is never wanted or invited into the bedroom, and it remains Ranjan's room.

Patriarchal Subjugation or Enslavement

The relationship between the sexually naïve Maya and asexual Ranjan follows the pattern of master and slave, where she exists as a dominated house servant and a captive in four walls. She suffers more than a patriarchal subjugation, but a type of enslavement. She is denied the basic right of a wife, of having a physical intimacy with her husband. Instead, he snaps at her, "What's your problem? You are beginning to sound like some sort of a nymphomaniac. Are you that sex starved?" (*Second Thoughts* 359). She begins to feel ashamed of herself for harbouring such thoughts and accepts her fate like a slave. She states, "I'd reconciled myself to the fact that I'd never bear children" (*Second Thoughts* 359). However, as a wife, she is made to perform all the household work and the kitchen becomes her refuge. Sheila Cronon in *Radical Feminism* argues, "Being a wife is a full-time job for which one is not entitled to receive payment. Does this not constitute slavery?" (217). She also affirms that given the existence of marriage and the fact that wives work for no pay but with the expectation of financial support from their husbands, divorce is against the interests of women. Hence, many women continue to remain stuck and endure unhappy marriages as they feel they have no other choice.

Perhaps because he is asexual, Ranjan attempts to showcase his masculinity by suppressing and controlling Maya in various ways like harassing her about minor things which could be avoided easily or corrected softly. He nags Maya, "Concentrate on keeping your house neat instead of gallivanting with these useless women," "Why do you keep arguing? Just accept what I say," "A housewife's duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top. That is where her true happiness lies" (*Second Thoughts* 78, 77, 79). Thus, Maya is trapped in four walls in monotonous matrimony. According to de Beauvoir, performing only household tasks make a wife's condition pathetic:

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, and the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. She never senses conquest of a positive Good. (de Beauvoir 438)

In an arranged marriage, a woman is considered an object who is not allowed to have any aspirations, desires, or interests but acts as an unpaid servant who shoulders the domestic chores. Thus, there are no outings, warmth, or intimacy developed between Maya and Ranjan. In a few months, Maya grows used to Rajan's periodic depressions which he prefers to call by assorted names such as "muscular cramps," "blurred vision," "gas," or "joint pains" (*Second Thoughts* 33). Any open show of affection makes him uncomfortable. Maya tries her best to adjust to the moods and eccentricities of her husband, whereas Ranjan is very much hostile even to the small desires of Maya like wearing a *gajra*¹³ or flowers in her hair which is very much appreciated in Calcutta. With time, the rift between them widens with very little communication. Rajan makes very brief calls to Maya to issue her certain instructions. Over time, she realizes that some husbands are passive to the emotional cravings of their partners, "men-husbands-rarely phone their wives just for a chat ... After marriage, everything changes" (*Second Thoughts* 293). Maya feels shattered and devastated as she thinks, "Somebody should have told me that this is what being married means. It means giving up everything that you have known as a carefree young girl" (*Second Thoughts* 270). Ranjan immerses himself in his files and Maya busies herself in the kitchen as they maintain a non-committal silence.

Married women are left with little or no choice. They have to perform gendered labor which is unpaid. Hence, Maya is rendered economically handicapped. Ranjan also checks her expenditures and warns her not to spend more than fifty rupees a day. He locks the outstation phone facility before leaving because of his rigid attitude toward giving economic freedom to her. Though she has a degree in Textile Design, Ranjan does not allow her to take up a job and rebukes, "In our families, the only sort of work ladies do is social work. Our relatives will criticize us...if you suddenly take up a job" (*Second Thoughts* 40). N.K. Neb states in the article "Feminist Stance in Shobhaa De's Novels" that Maya suffers due to her financial dependence on Ranjan. Similarly, traditional Indian women like Maya's mother, all three women characters in *A Matter of Time*, and many married women have to request money from their husbands even for their daily needs.

Maya does not attain womanhood and develops no sense of belongingness in Ranjan's house. She has nobody to talk to and there is a total communication gap between the couple. The insensitive, indifferent, loveless attitude of her husband along with constant subjugation, suffering, and crippling loneliness makes her a frustrated person:

¹³ A flower garland that is worn by Indian women during festive occasions, weddings, or as part of everyday traditional attire.

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belonged to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own. (*Second Thoughts* 372-73)

Sexually naïve Maya watches several TV shows dealing with the subject of sex and wonders what made normal people agree to appear on these shows and talk about such an intimate aspect of their lives. Maya wonders, “Would I do it? Would I be able to sit primly on a panel and tell the world that my husband and I had no sex life at all? That I had reconciled myself to the fact that I’d never bear children?” (*Second Thoughts* 358-59). She decides this is a matter they need to resolve themselves. When Maya summons the courage to discuss the subject, Ranjan snaps, “What’s your problem? You are beginning to sound like some sort of a nymphomaniac. Are you that sex-starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex be so important to anybody, I’ve never understood” (*Second Thoughts* 359). Sex is compulsory in marriage and a husband can legally force his wife to have sexual relations with him against her will, but sex normally cannot occur against his will (Cronon). For Maya, sexual intercourse means a sense of unity. Ranjan could never create a sense of oneness or intimacy. Instead, to hide his asexuality, Ranjan tries to use his patriarchal power and assert his masculinity by dominating and colonizing Maya, who should have been his equal partner or soulmate.

Physical pleasure strengthens the marital bond. *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* by Tim and Beverly La Haye discusses the sanctity of sex, and its importance as more than just a procreative act. In Chapter 3 of this book, *What Lovemaking Means to A Woman*, the author sets out the benefits that women derive from intimacy with their husbands, and the foremost is that it fulfills her sense of womanhood. Maya craves love, both emotional and physical, which Ranjan fails to provide. Shobhaa De writes in the introduction to *Spouse*, her ultimate relationship book, “How marriages work, and why they fail is essentially about love—or the absence of it” (4). Maya could not find any solution to her hollow matrimony. Her desperation makes her move on the path of betrayal and take refuge in the company of Nikhil, who has a magnetic charm and is the antithesis of Ranjan. Nikhil bubbles with enthusiasm as he is talkative, impressive, frank, and sensitive. He flatters her even for small things, “You look like a beautiful garden today” (*Second Thoughts* 45). Nikhil’s small compliments vivify her dull life and she begins to enjoy herself again. Her flirtations with Nikhil rejuvenate her spirits. She shares smaller things with him and he begins to get on her nerves. Nikhil takes advantage of Maya’s crippling loneliness and her need for companionship. When Ranjan leaves for a tour for ten days, Maya feels carefree and relieved from the pressure of being judged, watched, corrected, scolded, nagged, and instructed. She soothes her inner self under the canopy of Nikhil’s presence and goes sightseeing with him on his bike, pouring out her emotions of happiness. While enjoying life with Nikhil she also feels guilty thinking that it is wrong for a married woman to go out with another man and betray her husband. But this small betrayal makes her bold. Obsessed with second thoughts, Maya waits for him. Her yearning to attain womanhood makes her easy prey to Nikhil’s well-planned efforts and tricks, which she could not resist and eventually leads to a sexual encounter. As Maya recounts:

Every bit of me was suddenly alive to the feel of Nikhil’s lips, hands, arms, neck, chest, knees, and legs. An unknown recklessness started to sweep over me. Maybe I was going crazy. I did not want to think of the consequences. I refused to assume responsibility. I really didn’t care one way or the other. I felt free, lunatic, wonderful (*Second Thoughts* 375).

In the article “De-Analysis of Marital Relationships,” Priya Wanjari states, “Though all kinds of necessary things for a successful life are available in the family, both husband and wife drift away in different directions” (235). Can Maya be blamed for establishing an illicit relationship with Nikhil? Simon de Beauvoir states that all oppressions create a state of war. Ranjan did not even try to provide her with an emotional or spiritual bond. A dearth of any kind of bond, spiritual, emotional, or physical, between Maya and Ranjan makes them drift away in different directions. L. Sonia Ningthoujam, in “Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobhaa De” (2006), states that *Second Thoughts* is a novel that sketches the life of the higher middle class and the character of Maya presents a woman who conforms to the norms of the society but secretly breaks them when she finds them unjust and unacceptable (99). Thus, the traditional ideology of marriage is no longer functional in modern times and is not acceptable to new women. In “Traditional Woman versus Modern Woman: A Study of Shobhaa De’s Novels,” Ningthoujam describes how a real solution to Maya’s problems cannot be found. In De’s novels, the disadvantaged women break the bonds and norms that restrict their freedom to fulfill their dreams and desires. She suffers not only from patriarchal subjugation but enslavement in the name of marriage. As she comes from a conservative family and is economically dependent on her husband, she does not break the matrimonial bond, but instead takes refuge in the company of another man to fulfil her desires. Thus, she breaks the Hindu religious and traditional concept of the pious and self-effacing wife.

Conclusion

The exploration of the matrimonial bonds presented in the work of Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De shows the breakdown of the sacramental nature of traditional Hindu marriage, a divine religious bond, which ideally becomes a pure contract over time. Most arranged marriages, however, are not based on love, trust, or compatibility between two individuals but instead hollow foundations. The study reflects the truth that Indian women belonging to a male-dominated society based on traditional matrimony have no choice other than to endure subjugation, marginalization, and disregard from their husbands. Because of their economic dependency on their husbands and social security, divorce is not in women’s interests. Our progress is of little value if women like Kalyani and Maya are being kept as captives in the name of matrimony. At the same time, the two texts also show that society is advancing and undergoing cultural displacement. In traditional Indian culture, marital bliss and women’s role at home were the central focus, which is now being challenged by individualism and protest that were once alien ideas for women. Novels underline that women like Aru have started thinking for themselves and male hegemony in the name of matrimony is no longer acceptable. Marriage does not have a place in their scheme of things. And then because of the changing society, new women like Maya are emerging. Before the institution of marriage disintegrates or completely loses the trust of new women, a transformation is required. The prime onus is on women to empower themselves educationally and economically before entering into a matrimonial bond. The rigid patriarchal system needs to be diluted and the postmodern husband must consider the psychological and physical needs of his wife. The age-old, traditional institution of marriage subjugates women under the guise of matrimony, providing women only a house to live in and a family at the price of her identity, and this institution must be revised. Laws are not enough to transform matrimony. The mental and moral support of a spouse is needed to preserve the institution of marriage.

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