

Defying the Slut Shaming: Gender & Sexuality in Shobhaa De's Socialite Evenings

Raju Rana

Independent Researcher (rajurana1217@gmail.com)

Former UGC Senior Research Fellow, NIT Durgapur

Abstract:

The paper concentrates on the violation of the accepted norms of sexual behaviour and appearance by some women characters in Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings* (1989). Besides portraying how these women displayed their sexual feelings and the way they dressed in a sexually provocative way, it looks into how they were successful in suppressing the sexual desire of their husbands. With a focus on their resort to the sexual fantasies the study highlights these characters paid heed to the erotic fulfilment of their sexual urge. The paper investigates how the incompatibility in their conjugal lives led them to take part in extramarital affairs, and thereby challenging the stigma attached with the institution of marriage system. It features how these women were sexually liberated and moved beyond the precincts of sexual morality relating to the committed relationship. Any infringement upon the established codes of sexual conduct leads women to face the slut shaming. The study focuses on how these characters did not perceive any guilt and feel ashamed of themselves for their transgression from the dominant sexual ideologies. The paper uses the critical concept of 'slut shaming' and it can be useful to unravel how these women characters challenged the prescribed norms of female sexuality.

Keywords: Slut shaming, Gender, Sexuality, Dress Codes, Extramarital affairs

Introduction:

The term 'slut shaming,' used in a website- Urban Dictionary, has a reference to the respective words- "slut to whore, bitch, skank, ho, cunt, prostitute, tramp, hooker, easy, or slug" (Armstrong et al. 100). Although the expression 'slut shaming' does not hold an exact origin, its act has been manifested for centuries. It was formally coined in the late 2000s to highlight how women have been shamed for their transgression of sexual behaviour and appearance. The term was gained popularity in March of 2008 when an American critic and essayist Katha Pollitt used it in her article to denote "the abstinence only, father-knows-best, slut-shaming crabbed misogyny of the Republican right" (7). Furthermore, feminists have employed the expression to suggest the agency of girls and women. According to Jessalynn Keller, "The phrase [slut-shaming] became popularized alongside the SlutWalk marches and functions similarly to the 'War on Women,' producing affective connections while additionally working to reclaim the word 'slut' as a source of power and agency for girls and women" (93). There is discrimination with respect to shaming men and women for their sexual desire. "Traditionally, men and women have been subject to different "rules" guiding sexual behaviour. Women were stigmatized for engaging in any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage, whereas for men such conduct was expected and rewarded (Crawford & Popp 13). Furthermore, a man's sexual relations with multiple women are accepted in the society whereas a woman's agency of her sexuality is deemed to be a matter of shame. "They (women) were bound by their helpless situation (passive recipient of sexual favours) that they had no option but to accept their husband's philandering in order to remain married in a society that has different standards for men and

women” (Bhugra et al 86). The lack of sexual gratification and emotional vacuums lead women to get involved in extramarital affairs while slandering the reputation of a family. According to Wendy N. Hess, “A woman who engages in sexually promiscuous behavior with a man is shamed; she is deemed a ‘slut’” (584). Slut shaming is imposed upon women to silence their voice, indicating a threat to the misogynistic social structure. This paper will use the concept of slut-shaming to indicate how some women characters in Shobhaa De’s novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989) challenged the patriarchal script of sexual conduct and appearance.

Born in 1947 in a Saraswat Brahmin family of Maharashtra, Shobhaa De, the founder of several reputed magazines- *Society*, *Stardust* and *Celebrity*, and popularly known as ‘Jackie Collins of India,’ was emerged as a successful yet controversial writer with her debut novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989) (Kumari 329). Her novels encompass the spiritual and moral breakdown of middle class society with respect to the marriage system and marital relations (Altaf 310). According to Rebecca Bhattacharya, “De’s novels interpret and discover, overtly or covertly, sex-starved women’s indulgence in amorous activities. They feel dissatisfied with their husbands and find their love outside in extra-marital affairs” (p. 53). The novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989) has come into the critical surveillance by several scholars. A few critics have paid their attention to the feminist notions as expressed in this novel (Ramteke 146-147; Ghai et al 675-678; Patil 42-44). Some researchers have focused on the journey of women characters from the margin to the centre as analysed through the subaltern perspectives (Sandhanam & Vigneshkumar 378-383; Ramesh & Vanita 51-60). On the other hand, in *Socialite Evenings* (1989), female characters appear to be ‘New Women’ who are in search of identity and expression of their individuality (Rao & Sridevi 336-345). Several critics have highlighted these women exercised sexual freedom in the marriage dynamics as revealed in the novel (Prema & Malathy 637-639; Mishra 15-20). Although the concept of ‘slut shaming’ has been widely used in the analysis of films, its effect on school and college girl students and young women at workplaces, it has not been used to explore Shobhaa De’s novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989). While using the critical concept of ‘slut shaming,’ the paper aims to unravel the violation of accepted sexual behaviour and appearance by women character such as Anjali, Karuna, Charlie and Ritu as reflected in the novel.

Conceptualizing the Slut Shaming

Slut shaming is designed to belittle and degrade women for the expression of their sexual feelings and the way they dress, look, talk, flirt, or walk (Anushree). It denotes the “multiplicity of ways in which females are called to task for their real, presumed or imagined sexuality” (Tanenbaum xv). Moreover, it is not new, but a perpetual form of cultural suppression of female sexuality. Slut shaming endorses sexual virtue, particularly adherence to the established sexual behaviours and creates barriers in the articulation of their sexual fantasies (Parker 563-601). In addition, it is an act of slandering women whose sexual conduct moved beyond the prescribed norms about virtuous femininity. As Gujush Chopra opines:

“It [slut shaming] dictates that for women to be considered ‘respectable’, they ought to be passive respondents to male sexual desire, be mute facilitators of their sexual pleasure, and their own sexuality must come into play only in a monogamous, heterosexual and marital/committed relationship.”

As Shawrina Salam comments that “our society imposes on all women the patriarchal notion of “*pure ideal womanhood*.” Only sexual practices involving procreation or “*spousal responsibility*” are intended to be pursued by an ideal woman.” The notions of purity are related to sexual shame as women who engage in sexual activity or having several sex partners are deemed to be immoral and sinful. It intends to govern women’s sexuality by means of exercising cultural conventions and directing at those women who try to defy the established societal norms about sexual behaviour. The slut shaming phenomena exists when women are supposed as having sexual feelings, exploring them, or talking about sexual desire, as advocating unconventional sexual likings, as enjoying the nudity, as engaging in multiple extramarital affairs or dressing immodestly (Salam & Chopra).

The idea of slut shaming relates to Butler’s conception of gender performativity as it challenges the preconceived notions of gender and sex and addresses how gender norms are policed. “Sex’ is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms. This productive reiteration can be read as a kind of performativity” (Butler 107). Discourses on gender and sexuality influence body image, playing a key role in how slut-shaming affects sexual expression. Judith Butler commented:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body (xv). On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir stated that the prevailing social and cultural conditioning lays the foundation for constructing the female subject and highlights how women are projected as the “Other” in the male-dominated society (10-28). The dominant sexual norms are impacted by the power structures while allowing for a nuanced understanding of the various political connotations of slut-shaming. Gayle Rubin observed:

The subordination of women can be seen as a product of relationships by which sex and gender are organised and produced. The economic oppression of women is desirable and secondary. But there is an “an economics of sex and gender, and what we need is a political economy of sexual systems.’ (177).

The intersection of gender and sexuality is interpreted across different social contexts in India while playing a pivotal role in analysing the idea of slut shaming. Women with upper-class and urban backgrounds are able to resist the slut shaming because of their economic independence, social capital, and greater access to education or progressive networks. In contrast, women from the fringe of society do not have such privilege, and their resistance to the slut shaming gets enveloped by societal norms, lack of support systems, or economic dependence. While exploring the intersection of gender, sexuality, and societal roles in the context of India, Nivedita Menon stated that women’s roles are constructed within the cultural and social context and how these roles, especially concerning sexuality, are heavily regulated and controlled, revealing how these social and cultural expectations shape women's identities and experiences, reinforcing patriarchal structures (10-30).

Traditional Indian women seldom express their emotional and sexual needs and remain subservient to the mercy of their husbands for sexual gratification. “Instead of trying to conform to the prototypes of Sita, Savitri and Anusuya, these women tend to create a world free from all inhibitions. These women’s ideas and their sexual behaviour marks the attitude of so called liberal-minded people towards sex” (Arora

136). Their attempt at voicing their erotic desires is considered immoral and they are thought of being 'low and promiscuous' in the patriarchal codes of sexual conduct. In the novel, women characters discussed openly about sexual matters, and engaged in extra marital affairs- their activities moved beyond the prescribed norms of female sexuality, demonstrating their defiance to the slut shaming. Whatever actions they undertook while going against the wishes of their families, they primarily focus on their happiness rather than follow the existing societal norms. They bravely fight against the preconceived notions of the ideal womanhood by indulging in extramarital relationship. "As far as sexual relationship is concern, Karuna and other women characters by breaking the shackles of marital relationship, moral social code and code of conduct family relationship, freely develop sexual relationship outside the marital relationship" (Pawar 979). They also shattered the rigid stereotypes about their sexual feelings, bringing about disgrace to the families, corroborates the fact that they do not subscribed to the shame-based policing of sexuality. "De's women like Anjali and Karuna project their power on others, to deconstruct the male ego. They like to be "eroticized as objects" and to view themselves as "erotic objects", not subjects" (Morgan 143).

Anjali: Sexual Liberation & Extramarital Affairs

Anjali displayed her nails in such a way that sexually drew men closer to her as the novel reveals that "at least one of her lovers who was attracted to and could never get over her nails" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 2). The way Anjali uttered her voice that "was sort of throaty and sexy, but she gobbled up all her words, and those that emerged were not exactly dazzling (De, *Socialite Evenings* 4). Anjali also liked her nude pictures and intended to show them to her friend Karuna, suggesting her expression of sexual feeling. "She went to her dressing table, pulled out the top drawer and extracted a bunch of polaroids. 'Look at these,' she said and handed them to me. They were crude, nude shots of Anjali" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 25). For Anjali, the codes of purity and chastity had no value and she did not suffer from any sense of guilt. To push aside marked curbs on her behaviour by the patriarchal system and fulfil her sexual urges Anjali constantly enjoyed the company of a rich man, Kumar Bhandari. Even she did not hesitate from being romantically and sexually engaged with a teenager Karan. Despite the consent of Pierre in marrying her Anjali wanted to be sexually emancipated outside the marital relationship, suggesting her defiance to the slut shaming:

Anjali's affair with Pierre was 'doomed affair.' Pierre was a divorcee so there weren't major complications in his life. But Anjali was not prepared for along commitment to him (De, *Socialite Evenings* 91).

Anjali did not feel ashamed of her sexuality, rather she tried to reveal her sexual feelings and satisfied it on her own. "No doubt, women need the companionship of men to satisfy their natural urge, but De's women are bold and sexually liberated. They establish extra-marital affairs to get rid of their marital boredom" (Grimke 10). Anjali's rejection of sexual morality through her involvement in multiple extramarital affairs suggests her ardent endeavour to defy the slut shaming.

In the conservative society, fornication and adultery are deemed the cardinal sins (Kumar 3).

Female characters in Shobhaa De's novels are sexually bold as they thought it might be rightful to give vent to their suppressed sexual desire and emotional needs. In *Socialite Evenings*, while transcending the ethical precincts of the institution of marriage Anjali prioritized the erotic fulfilment in her life over her adherence to the notions of purity about female sexuality. She resorted to the sexual fantasies and thereby to give vent to her sexual urge. When Karuna objected to her sexual relation with Karan, Anjali retorted: "Sex.Sex.Sex. What's wrong with you, woman? Obviously you don't get enough of it. You seem to have sex on your mind all the time" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 113).

Karuna: Defying Sexual Norms

Karuna articulated her sexual feelings while watching the nude photographs. As Shobhaa De wrote that Karuna gathered "all wrapped (the bulky X'mas issue) up in a newspaper it still looked exactly what it was- a nudie magazine" (11). Karuna's marriage with "an average Indian husband-exciting, uninspiring, untutored" "went sour" because she married "the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 73). Without conforming to the established sexual morality, Karuna openly declared that her husband was not sexually compatible as stated in the novel:

He [Karuna's husband] generally felt like sex only on the days he skipped his regular workout at the health club. Making love was losing calories to him. I saw it as nothing more than a vague habit... My husband notwithstanding, sex, I'd discovered, rated very low in my life (De, *Socialite Evenings* 75).

Karuna was ready to break off the marriage vows to her husband, leading her sexual life on her own. She cared least about the sanctity of the marriage system and the sexual norms surrounding it. Her loveless relationship with her husband leads her to establish an extramarital affair with Krish. In this respect, she was labelled as an 'adulteress' who betrays her faithful husband. Her infringement of the existing sexual conduct and the ideals of dutiful and traditional Indian housewife indicate her protest against the slut shaming. The novel records:

You really make me sick. I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We've got nothing going... I'm tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerisms, the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into your overall scheme of things. I really don't care one way or the other if I ever see you again. So just get off my back. You've found out about Krish and me- so fine (De, *Socialite Evenings* 237).

Anjali suggested that her extramarital relationship with Krish was appropriate in the sense that her "marriage isn't fantastic, but it isn't a total write-off either" and she "can have both- a boring husband in the home and an exciting lover on the sidelines- perfect" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 212). In this regard, Karuna advocates her alliance with Krish, challenging the slut shaming as reflected in the novel:

We are both free in a way- freer than most other couples. There are no children in both the marriages, and the respective spouses aren't the sort to create hurdles. The whole thing could be

handles in civilized way without creating too many ripples (De, *Socialite Evenings* 213).

Karuna's husband considered her wife's extramarital relation an unsavoury issue and a sense of guilt she had to endure. He addressed her as 'a spoiled woman' as she wanted her kicks and comforts in both ways. However, he intended to give her "one more chance" and prepares to "cancel one black mark" on her performance record and "start with a clean slate" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 227). She still continued her hobnobbing with Krish, suggesting her attempt to subvert the sexual morality. Despite her parents' advice of "a woman's real place is in her husband's home- not in her parents" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 227), Karuna defied the prevailing norms about the institution of marriage by rejecting the proposal from Ranbir Roy. The novel highlights the difference in the attitudes of Karuna and her mother regarding the marriage system. Karuna turns down the idea of her second marriage with Girish Sridhar and prefers friendship to the subjugation of committed relationship. Her transgression of the accepted sexual conduct in marital relationship shows her challenge to the slut shaming as is evinced in the novel: "I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. I like and respect Girish" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 341). Karuna turned to sexual fantasies as a way to express and satisfy her sexual desires. She started talking about the bestiality of Kumar (one of the boyfriends of Anjali), and in this respect, Anjali pointed out:

Your mind is worse than a garbage can. Can't you think of anything besides sex? Woman- you are hard up. Finished (De, *Socialite Evenings* 245).

Resisting Conformity: Charlie's Audacious Rebellion

Charlie, one of the classmates of Karuna, encountered the various incidents of slut shaming in schools and colleges as evinced in the novel. She defied the sexual stigmatization by the way she dressed. "She would proudly pick up her school tunic to show them off to the rest of us during the lunch break. How we envied her the pretty pink buds!" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 14). By pushing aside the established dress codes, Charlie wore "her fire-engine-red pair to a school outing once and scandalized everybody" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 16). She stuck to her point when principal of the school objected to her use of costume: "You will go home at once,' she was ordered. But it didn't matter. She'd wanted to create a sensation and she'd succeeded (De, *Socialite Evenings* 16). She appeared such a sexually provoking way that stole the hearts of many men. The novel narrated such an incident when Karuna and Charlie used to walk to college in the morning sessions:

She (Charlie) still attracted a lot of attention on the street and at college mainly because of the flashy way she dressed and comforted herself. She was about the only girl in First Year who applied make-up-lots of it. And wore pointy-toed shoes with four-inch heels (De, *Socialite Evenings* 18).

Ritu: A Bold Challenge to Sexual Expectations

Another woman character Ritu wore a "sexy T-shirt with a sequined melon on it" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 131) to seduce a teenager Karan who was the ex-boyfriend of Anjali. Karan started watching her powerful game and she watched his staring at her dress. To completely win the boy she pushed out her

breasts, suggesting her infringement upon the moral scripts of female sexuality. Karuna, the associate of Ritu, states that she was fascinated by the way Ritu appears to men. Ritu's seductive glances even "attracted all sorts, from little servant boys she mothered to silver-haired industrialists, who drooled at her feet and begged for a while" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 127). She was very manipulative and engaged in extramarital affairs. She knew how to use her body to make her husband subservient and feel guilty during the sexual intercourse. She was not ready to allow her husband to involve in extramarital affairs, but she continued to be in relationship with other men without her husbands' permission, insinuating her attempt to suppress the male sexuality- a kind of protest against the slut shaming. Ritu said, "I look after his mother, his home, his needs. why shouldn't I expect something in return. If I didn't not fulfil him in bed- he'd look elsewhere. Maybe go to a prostitute (De, *Socialite Evenings* 100). On the contrary, she was found "in the hostess' bedroom sitting on the bed, with a slobbering man at her feet and the man "was weeping while she was murmuring soothing words" (De, *Socialite Evenings* 128). Like Karuna, Ritu discarded the hush-hush culture of female sexuality and boldly declared the sexual weakness of her husband. "Her only grouse against her husband was his lack of drive and general unadventurousness. And so she maintained the other satellites in her orbit for temporary amusement (De, *Socialite Evenings* 129).

These female characters in *Socialite Evenings* challenge patriarchal norms and reshape their sexual identities. Besides enumerating the actions and attitudes of the female actors, the paper aims to engage in analysing the narrative voice of the novelist. The narrative technique of Shobhaa De, including linguistic devices such as sarcasm, irony, or even hyperbole, uncovers her creation of strong characters and critique of social attitudes. Her narrative voice is characterized by a perfect blending of critique and intimacy in which she cordially invites the readers to empathize with or question the women characters the novel depicts. In delineating female characters such as Anjali, Karuna, Charlie and Ritu, Shobhaa De represents their sexuality as allure and condemnation, underscoring the tension between society's perception of women's agency and the actual pictures of their desires. While women characters exhibit moments of defiance and strength, the language the novel employs to describe them often undermines their resistance to the slut shaming. Even though their boldness is expressed through the tone of irony while creating a sense of self-awareness about the stigma they are breaking- suggesting the fractured nature of resistance to social judgment. It also pinpoints the internalized misogyny that complicates such resistance. Although the male characters in this novel reacted to how the female characters transgressed the sexual codes, they sometimes remained passive, betrayed, indifferent, or defiant, indicating the power dynamics at play. It exposes how patriarchal power structures oppress both women and men while constructing the fragile notions of male identity.

Conclusion:

The paper focuses on how female characters, such as Karuna, Anjali, Charlie, and Ritu, played defiant roles that reflect a significant shift in social attitudes towards sexual empowerment and their transgression from the established conventions. It also examines the violation of prescribed codes of female sexuality through the way women characters appear to men as revealed in the novel. Besides mentioning these women's celebration of their sexuality, it explores how they were successful in suppressing the male sexual desire. Women characters not only take recourse to the expression of sexual

feelings without fear of judgment, punishment, or societal constraints but also show their penchant for the nudity- a protest against the slut shaming. Furthermore, they resort to sexual fantasies to pose a shield against the patriarchal script of female sexuality. The paper highlights how these women challenged the traditional ideals of womanhood by prioritizing the erotic fulfilment of their lives over their allegiance to the sexual urges of their husbands. By exposing the incompatibility of their marriages it also unveils how women characters intended to have sexual autonomy while engaging in extramarital affairs, suggesting their endeavour to break the stigma associated with the marriage system. Neither were they ashamed of their activity nor did they feel a sense of guilt for moving beyond the precincts of sexual morality, defying the prevailing slut shaming. The paper employs the concept of slut shaming and demonstrates how women characters bravely fought against the established script of female sexual conduct and appearance. The study contributes to the discourses of gender and sexuality by providing unique insights into how the individual desires of these characters, cultural values, and societal expectations intersect and clash simultaneously.

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