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Feminist Stance in Shobha De's Novels

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Abstract

The Twentieth century has been an age of awareness of one's rights, and women have become conscious of their equality with men. Women writers, particularly novelists have dedicated their writings as a medium for the uplift of women. Irrespective of their race, culture, nationality and language, all women novelists have given a clarion call to the empowerment of women. In order to unfold how contemporary women novelists voice themselves for women, the novels of Shobha De, an Indian woman novelist in English has been analyzed.

Keywords

Self-Identity; Male Domination; Women Emancipation.



During the last few decades, many writers have tried to give voice to the women's struggle for women's equality with man has been described very effectively in literature. Particularly the novelist, like Nayantara Sahagal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharathi Mukherjee, who represent the second generations of novelists, rebelled against the set standards. They all challenged the patriarchal culture which is dominant in India. Indian women novelists have focused their attentions on the problems faced by women and this has been reflected in their works. In our society, the role of women goes on changing every decade, this role changed according to the struggle based on social and ideological aspects. Earlier their protest was very mild and soft. But gradually a strong and intense anger was added to it. As a result, there was a revolt. This voice of protest was quite mild when it started in writers like Anita Desai, but later it becomes stronger and more intense in writers like Shobha De and some others.

Shobha De came under limelight in the field of literature in 1988 when her best seller *Socialite Evenings* was published. Shoba De is a versatile figure who played various roles in her life. The popularity of her writings has made her a household name and some of her novels have found their place on bestseller lists.

De's fictional world marks the overwhelming presence of women. In almost all of her novels, a woman is the protagonist. The life's spectacles and the world-views presented in her novels are directly or indirectly related to women. Women's behaviour, their thoughts and their responses in different situations forms the main concern of De's fictional works. In her novels we come across a variety of women from extremely modern, assertive, young and liberated to the traditional. Indian's life and their immediate problems, make the presence of feminist perspective an essential aspect of her fiction.

The women in the De's fictional world belong to the world of showbiz, opulence and romance. Their problems and concerns are different from those

of the ordinary traditional middle class women. Being educated and wealthy, they have an easy access to new ways of life in shaping women's independence. The recent ideas about women's liberation have brought with them awareness about their marginalization and developed an intense desire for freedom. In *Socialite Evenings* Karuna's words reveal how these women have been influenced by feminist thinkers and women writers. "I thrilled to the exploits of Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer, read fear of flying to bits, women, it seemed, for the first time, could have controlled their lives"(65). It marks these women's discontent in the life of domesticity and their enthusiasm to gain the subject position. The ideas of new found freedom attract them. The different nature of their life and concerns makes them involve in a different form of struggle. Their views about life and women's freedom may seem insignificant and irrelevant to docile, submissive and traditional women. But the issues they raise are extremely relevant as they expose the subtle ways in which patriarchal system works to perpetuate man's dominance in society and interpersonal relationship.

Shobha De has tried her best to expose the moral breakdown of modern society in which a hapless and forsaken woman longs for fulfillment and wants to fly in the sky unfettered. So her women go through the upheavals of life on physical and emotional levels to finally achieve some measure of freedom from social bondage.

Shobha De in her major novels like *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, and *Second Thoughts* show the principle of the social mobility working behind the class or cultural changes in women who try to exert for their place in the society they live in. All leading women characters in Shobha De's novels face a crisis of identity. She places her characters in certain delicate human circumstances, which make self discovery and very often find themselves alienated. Many times they travel through a world of fantasy in order to come no terms with the reality of the situations.

Her novels deal with men and women belonging to the upper class or middle class with their obsessions, disappointments and insecurities. She wants equal opportunities for woman. In the Indian set up a woman is expected to enact the role of an obedient daughter, a dutiful and a devoted wife and finally a sacrificing mother. At no time during her life, she is treated as a person. Even Manu, the first law giver observes centuries back while laying down the cruel social codes says a woman in her childhood is protected by her father, in her youth by her husband and in old age by her son. She in no stage of her life is left unprotected.

Shobha Des first novel *Socialite Evenings* centers round Karuna, a young woman born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra and very soon, she along with her parents migrated to Bombay. There she meets Anjali, a prominent socialite in the company of whom her whole world changes and marries Bunty, a rich business man. The family, too, accepts him because of his social status. But she feels that he was just an average Indian husband unexciting, uninspiring, untutored.

Karuna gets bored with her husband as he does not share her interests. She does not want to have a baby and seeks abortion when she gets pregnant. But to her utter shock, she comes to know that she cannot conceive any more. In the process of establishing her identity she divorces her husband and takes up journalism as her career. Ranbir, her college mate is fit to have fun with but is not fit enough to be her life partner. She thus appears to be a hollow woman of our modern wasteland. She feels oppressed in spite of her freedom. However, through her journey from innocence to experience Karuna succeeds in her race for identity.

Other women like Anjali and Ritu too, have been portrayed as 'sick' as they are unable to face the shocking realities after discarding the veil, the protective purdah. They are attractive, self assured, happy with wealth, happy with the pleasures which they could buy with money and the new found

freedom. Anjali leaves behind her teenage daughter under her husband's care who allows her to take any man to bed as long as she wishes. Thus, we find that for all the three women in the novel, marriages are 'marriages of convenience with no obligation to emotional faithfulness and social fidelity'.

Starry Nights is the story of the struggle of a woman. Sharani, who in order to survive, comes to Bombay, along with her mother. There she comes in contact with a small time producer Krishnabhai who exploits her physically as well as mentally. Very soon she leaves him. Then she establishes a relationship with two persons Akshay Arora, the top star of cinema and Abhijit Mehra, the son of an industrialist. But both of them are married. So the relationships do not work. She marries one of her fans and changes her identity and becomes Mrs. Jammy Phillips she then feels very happy. She tries to forget her past life. The novel depicts the modern women's search for identity in a male dominated society.

Sisters another important novel by Shobha De centers around two sisters- Mikki and Alisha. Mikki, leaving her studies in the USA comes to Bombay to attend to the funeral of her parents killed in an air crash. She becomes an owner of her father's big business empire, known as Seth Hiralal Industries. She resolves to fight for her 'self' and her 'share' in her father's business. For Alisha, money gives identity and is more important than any human relation. But to Mikki, blood relations are more valuable than wealth. Mikki gets offers of marriage from various persons- Binny Malhotra, a business tycoon, Shanay, the son of Anjanaben, Navin, another businessman, but she finally marries Binny. Very soon, she finds that he has a mistress and children, which makes her totally disappointed. Like a typical Indian wife, she cries out to Amy, her friend.

I don't want to fix him. I love the man. Call me a doormat a slave, a victim, anything I've forgotten what pride is or ever was. He can, and does, trample all over me.

Shobha De's working class women, however, are stronger than the educated and rich urban ones.

Her next novel, *Strange Obsession* revolves around the life and lustful relationship of two young women, Minakshi and Amirta. Amirta comes from a noble and educated family, decided to try her hand in modeling. So she settles down in Bombay where she encounters Minx, a modern lady free from all taboos and values. Minx is a lesbian and she is extremely passionate for Amrita. Shobha De has explored the inner and psychic reality of her character. Minx is so possessive about Amirta that she does not even allow her to establish a relationship with her boyfriend.

Her next two novels *Sultry Days* and snapshots also portray similar type of women. Nisha, the central character in *Sultry Days*, on a rainy day in Bombay, she meets Deb, popularly known as God in the college canteen and falls in love with his ragged, bearded looks and crude manners. He loves the world of art and journalism while Nisha prefers a job in advertising. They fall passionately in love with each other. Nisha really discovers herself through the character of Deb.

In *Snapshots*, six women—Aparna, Rashoni, Swati, Reema, Surekha and Noor share their past memories, some are happy, other bittersweet and a few that are downright poisonous. In the course of sharing their dark secrets, they begin to turn against one another and ultimately their meeting becomes nightmarish. De has freely discussed several stance of infidelity, incest and many other evils which lurk beneath the everyday lives of people.

Second Thoughts, one of her latest novels depicts crisis in the life of Maya, a pretty young lady from Calcutta. She moves determined to be an ideal wife. But she finds herself trapped and stuffed in her marriage and tries to liberate herself. After marriage, it is the desire of every woman that she should go for outings in the company of her husband. Maya, too expects it from Ranjan. But he is unable to understand her sentiments. Not only this, he also

dampens her spirit by refusing her proposal to work. All these instances are enough to make Maya understand her husband's conservative outlook and his complete, utter loneliness of a stranger in suburban Bombay. At this juncture Nikhil, her friend from college days enters her life. And it is quite natural on the part of Maya to renew her friendship with Nikhil. She starts relishing his company. But at the same time she is fully conscious of her limitations as a married woman. She never crosses the boundaries and this makes her totally different from her counterparts like Karuna, Aasha Rani, Nisha, and Mikki. They have no hesitations in establishing adulterous relationship with their male friends. Maya, like other women likes to be praised by others. This is quite typical of Shoba De's women characters. They are often confused between good and evil deeds, but they mostly choose the evil ones which reflect the dominance of negative traits in their character. They are in a way weak due to complete freedom from authority but very soon they realize the triviality of their actions as they lead them nowhere.

Thus we find that Shobha De has cast her women characters in the same mold. Maya in *Second Thoughts* is slightly different from her predecessors. She is at least aware of her limitations imposed by marriage. She rejoices in the company of Nikhil for the time being but ultimately accepts her predicament with a smile. Shobha De's women are often torn between two aspects—domesticity and their urge for sex. And in order to get the satisfaction they do not hesitate in establishing illicit relationships with other men. There are some rebellious women who reject men and seek space in lesbianism.

De's women, being modern, educated and conscious of their marginalization, resent different behavioral patterns that perpetuate their suppression. The traditional system that ascribes control over money to the husband is disliked by these women. They experience humiliations when they are not allowed to spend money and use domestic hems as freely and according to their will as their husbands do. Maya in *Second Thoughts* undergoes this

experience. “I didn’t dare make long –distance calls without seeking Ranjan’s permission” (*Second Thoughts* 67). These women not only resent man’s control over money, but also challenge the man’s monopoly in providing financial security. They assert their right to earn and control money.

In some cases even men have to seek financial support from women. Nisha in *Sultry Days* supports Deb until he gets a job or starts earning from his association with Yashwantbhai. Although most of these women belong to rich families, their problem is to have control over money. It makes them assertive and aggressive as they believe, “money can buy the best husband in the world” (*Sisters* 101).

Their frank expressions about sexual drives reject the sexual morality essentially ordained for women. Their reference to the sex act unambiguous terms shatters the traditional image of a woman that presents her as submissive, docile, calm and meek. The experience presented through these explicit details makes women express their protest when the narrator expresses such acts in detail. Mikky’s feelings about this incident proves it. “And she was happy. They had broken all the rules and every taboo she had ever known” (*Sisters* 18).

Instead of treating their sexuality as a burden or weakness these women consider it an effective weapon in the power game of relationships. These women’s understandings of sex in terms of power makes them to think. “Men like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment” (*Socialite Evenings* 87). Their conception of power in terms of sex makes their situation complex.

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani uses her sexual power, instead of her ability for good acting, to win a worthwhile place in films. In *Sisters*, Mikky uses sex, her body to extract revenge on her sister Alisha and to have control over a married man Dr. Kurien. These women believe that their body provides them with a special power to protest against male hegemony or to win a viable space

in the world dominated by men. How men treat these women as non-beings and objects of sexual gratification and the consequences of the woman's conception of power related to their body forms a major feature of De's understanding of women's problems. An interesting aspect of De's understanding of modern urban women's behavior is presented in their adoption of Pseudo feminism. Their own attitude does not indicate the presence of any great-impetus for rebellion against the present system.

In order to reject the idea of male superiority, De exposes the pseudo shoes of masculinity in man. The qualities of bravery, power- both physical and sexual are traditionally attributed to man. Women are considered to be weak, emotional and dependent on men. But in De's novels these ideals have been put upside down. Women characters, in her novels, show exemplary courage and strength in the times of crises. Aasha Rani, Karuna, Mikky and Amirta struggle hard and never think of defeat at the hands of men. They neither give up their efforts nor do they give in. Instead of being emotional they come out to be practical and pragmatic.

Women in De's novels have different-thinking and want to create a world of their own. They are usually found involved in the activities traditionally ascribed to men. They seldom show any inclination or interest in family affairs, relatives and domestic chores. They discuss professional life, interpersonal relationships, business matters and matters related to sex and sexual behavior. Their behavior is frank and uncontrolled and they do not feel shy about their sexual behavior and express their thoughts in unambiguous terms. Line of domesticity is no longer enough to absorb these women's energies.

An important aspect of De's feminist concerns can be traced in the view that control over money is essential to provide a respectable place for women. For example, Amma in *Stary Nights* and Leelaben in *Sisters* indulge in immoral activities when they feel financially insecure. Maya in *Second Thoughts* suffers due to her financial dependence on Ranjan. Similarly, traditional Indian

women like Maya's mother do not ask their husbands for money even for their day to day needs. Financial security is the basis for women's emancipation.

The women characters in almost all of De's novels struggle against men. They adopt aggressive and assertive behavior. They treat men as eternally opposed to them. Here again the result is frustration, suffering regret and a sense of loss. This is surely an outcome of women's liberation movement. They indulge in all sorts of pleasure giving activities, but ultimately they fail to establish their individuality. In a way, we can say that her women characters are not bold enough to revolt against male egoism. They are standing at the cross-roads failing to choose between convention and liberation.

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