
Registration No. V-36244/2008-09

ISSN :- 2350-0611

The journal has been listed in 'UGC Approved List of Journals' with Journal No. – 48441 in previous list of UGC

JIFE Impact Factor – 3.23

Research Highlights

A Multidisciplinary Quarterly International Peer Reviewed Referred Research Journal

Editor

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Azamgarh

Volume - X

No. - 1

(Jan. – Mar. 2023)

Published by
Future Fact Society
Varanasi (U.P.) India

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New Women in Shobha De's Novels

Dr. Raj Kamal Mishra*

Abstract:

Shobha De's woman goes all out in enjoying the status as the new modern woman. They shatter the age old concept of the traditional Indian woman with their assertive, individualistic and carefree attitude towards life. In this new image, the new woman have got extreme independence in almost every field and one of the most striking and interesting freedoms they enjoy is sexual freedom. A new sexual practice is adopted by De's woman, i.e. Lesbianism. Her novels present life-like situations of individuals belonging to the rich and powerful upper class of modern Mumbai, a prominent Asiatic metropolis which is culturally at par with its western counterparts like London or New York.

Key Words: marginalization, feminist, sexist, New Woman, patriarchal, freedom

Contemporary women, as described by Shobha De, are individuals who challenge social norms and transform into new identities. These women, often corporate ladies, movie actresses, business tycoons' spouses and children, and bureaucrats, represent a small but significant segment of the population, often part of the wealthy and influential world. De's novels depict a new generation of independent women, highlighting their unique characteristics and challenges.

“The scene was changing, even in Bombay. Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single.”(Shobha De, 1995, p. 44.)

Modern women, as depicted in Shobha De's novels, are known for their extravagant lifestyles and pursuit of status and wealth. They command attention and indulgence from men and people they come into contact with, driving trendiest cars, going to expensive hotels, and even traveling abroad. These women do not have fixed time for returning home like their traditional counterparts who do not move out of their houses except for marketing or going to temples or offices.

Shobha De portrays these women with great enthusiasm and accuracy, having herself walked shoulder to shoulder with these women and rising to fame and glory. In *Socialite Evenings*, De's first novel, the women characters live a life of fun, enjoyment, and self-indulgence, regardless of the pain and unhappiness that come by leading such reckless lives. All they care about is their status and wealth.

In *Socialite Evenings*, Anjali and Karuna are non-conformists who leave their conventional Indian middle class homes in search of freedom. They marry for convenience and are little bothered about the type of person their man will turn out to be in the long run or how long their marriage will last. They feel no scruples in fixing up extra marital connections even when their marriages are intact.

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Anjali marries Abe (Abas Tyabji), who is rich and could give her all the luxury she had dreamt of. She procures young virgins for Abe's sexual satisfaction and is not jealous when Abe takes a new girl to bed. She also has her own set of lovers, including an illicit relationship with a young boy who could well be her son but ends in a disaster.

Karuna, another woman from a conservative background, joins the shunned world of modeling and marries for money. However, her dreams are tarnished when her husband turns out to be a typical Indian male who has little consideration for his wife's wishes. In desperation, Karuna picks up her husband's friend Krish to satisfy her sexual urges and goes on a holiday in Venice.

De's *Starry Nights* follows Aasha Rani, who is inducted into the glittering Bombay film world by her own mother, who sells her daughter's chastity in her quest for fame and wealth. Aasha Rani succeeds and flourishes in the film industry using her body as a bait to catch big producers and directors' attention. As she confesses to film financier Kishenbhai: "You financed and produced my first film Kishenbhai, but you extracted payment from my body." (Shobha De, *Starry Nights*, p. 236.)

In "Sisters," Aasha Rani, a girl from a conservative traditional family, rises to become a top heroine in the Hindi film industry. However, she disregards traditional Indian moral values and engages in extramarital relationships, leading to disastrous love affairs with Akshay Arora. Aasha transforms into a fiery go-getter, showcasing her individuality in the male-dominated Indian society. Despite receiving scorn from her sisters, she remains a modern woman presented by Shobha to the conservative tradition-conscious society. In "Sisters," Mikki and Alisha Hiralal, half-sisters and legitimate heirs of business tycoon Seth Hiralal, try to make a place in the world of big business after their father's death. Mikki succeeds and becomes a business tycoon, facing numerous challenges along the way. At one point, to save her failing business empire she decides to tie up with another business tycoon Binny Malhotra. Mikki ends up marrying Binny on the advice of Amy: "The quickest way to hoot to the top is to tie up with Malhotra. A disastrous marriage can always be put behind you darling. These days divorce is not what it used to be. You are young and attractive. There will be a dozens of Malhotras later." (Shobha De, 1995, p. 468.)

In De's *Strange Obsession*, women prioritize their desires and equality over men. Mikki, a woman who suffers from her husband's indifference to her wishes, leaves her marriage and starts a new life with her half-sister Alisha. They face the world alone, with Mikki expressing her desire for a great future with or without men.

These women care little for men and view them as mere means to achieve their goals. They drink, attend parties, and refuse to remain at their masters' mercy. Instead, they aim to teach men a lesson, turning the table upside down and destroying notions of respectability and morality.

In De's *Strange Obsession*, Amrita Aggarwal, a young aspiring model, falls into an illicit relationship with a lesbian named Minx. Minx follows Amrita like a lover boy, ruling her life and encouraging sexual relations despite her objections. Minx forces Amrita to rebuff her for her reluctance, causing a significant change in the novel.

“Why? Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because I belong to the same sex? Is that my only fault? You find it sickening to accept my love but what about that animal Rover’s love? That’s Okay. You enjoy that. How come? And don’t tell ‘because they are men and it’s normal.’ Bull shit! There is nothing abnormal about my feelings for you.”(Shobha De, 1995,p. 596.)

Amrita, a woman trapped in Minx's fascination, is forced to marry Rakesh, but Minx continues to bother her. This lesbian relationship reflects the emerging reality of modern women who find sexual satisfaction with persons of the same gender. A new moral code is emerging, as these women freely choose their partners whether they belong to the opposite sex or the same sex. Minx's behavior towards Amrita is that of a protective lover, and Amrita's slipping into this strange relationship is just another manifestation of the new woman's intriguing mentality which undermines the traditional notion of social acceptability of marriage or legitimate sexual relationship among persons of opposite sex.

In Snapshots, the women-Aparna, Swati, Reema, Surekha, and Rashmi are all modern women living on their own terms. They believe divorce is as normal as marriage, and they live on their own terms. Aparna leaves her husband Rohit for not living up to her standard and starts an affair with Prem, who works in her office. Swati returns home after years in London and finds a gathering of her old school friends at Reema's house. All her friends are very much like her, becoming rich through their husbands, drinking, having strings of lovers, and being independent. Noor, a submissive Muslim woman, is sexually exploited by her brother Nawaz, and when her conscience pricks, she commits suicide. However, from the new woman's point of view, she is a pessimist and weak woman far different from her friends who believe in a new morality of sexual promiscuity.

In the novel follows six friends, including Swati, who is the most selfish and cunning of them all. She hides a video tape camera to record conversations and events from their school days, including their sexual adventures and personal matters. They even organize a strip tease show among themselves, which Swati recorded. However, when she is about to leave, Swati is caught red-handed, intending to write, direct, and produce a bold TV series on the Indian urban woman of the Nineties.

De projects the image of a highly self-confident, self-reliant, and fearless modern woman in the characters. Amrita is trapped in Minx's unnatural fascination and craze for her, even after Amrita gets married to Rakesh. Minx goes all out to revive Amrita's illicit relationship with her, making it difficult to believe that such a relationship can happen in our conservative society.

The lesbian relationship between Amrita and Minx demonstrates the emerging reality of the new modern woman who finds sexual satisfaction with persons of the same gender. A new moral code is emerging, as women freely choose their partners whether they belong to the opposite sex or to the same sex. Minx's behavior towards Amrita is that of a protective lover, and Amrita's slipping into this strange relationship is just another manifestation of the new woman's intriguing mentality which undermines the traditional notion of social acceptability of marriage or legitimate sexual relationship among persons of opposite sex.

In *Snapshots*, the women—Aparna, Swati, Reema, Surekha, and Rashmi—are all modern women who lead lives on their own terms. They believe that divorce is as normal as marriage, and they live on their own terms. Aparna leaves her husband Rohit for not living up to her standard and starts an affair with Prem, who works in her office. Swati returns home after years in London and organizes a gathering of her old school friends at Reema's house. All her friends are very much like her, becoming rich through their husbands, drinking, having strings of lovers, and being independent.

Noor, a submissive Muslim woman left with little strength to assert herself, is sexually exploited by her brother Nawaz. Swati makes it clear to Noor that it was an offensive thing to do, and when her conscience pricks, Noor commits suicide. However, from the new woman's point of view, Noor is a pessimist and weak woman far different from her friends who are daredevils and believe in a new morality of sexual promiscuity.

Shobha De's women do not care for any moral or traditional values. Again, in *Second Thoughts*, Maya, a Calcutta girl, marries a wealthy Mumbai businessman, Ranjan. Despite his high social status, Ranjan is an obedient boy who works with his mother's permission. Maya finds her role as a housewife boring and her husband, a typical Indian male, disapproves of women working outside the home. Despite her expectations of a glamorous life in Bombay, Maya finds her life filled with boredom and unfulfilled dreams. As Maya expresses her wish: "I wanted the city to seep into me slowly. I wanted to absorb it, digest it, make it a part of my system. I wanted desperately to become a Bombaywali. I wanted to belong." (Shobha De, 1996, p. 27.)

Maya, a married woman in Bombay, is frustrated by her husband's indifference and rebellious nature, leading her to seek fulfillment in her dreams elsewhere. She takes a strong interest in her neighbor's young son Nikhil, who easily takes to Maya and becomes her most precious enjoyment. However, their affair ends tragically when Nikhil gets engaged to another girl, leaving Maya in a terrible situation.

De's novels portray the disadvantaged women breaking the bonds and norms that limit their freedom to fulfill their dreams or desires. These women want sexual pleasure outside their marriage, an identity outside the boundaries of homes, and to feel equal to men. They refuse to bow to tradition, convention, and oppression, and are far from the conservative stronghold of Indian society.

De's novels showcase the new modern women, a striking group emerging stealthily in Indian aristocratic society. These women have their own social circles and care little for what their hostile critics may say. They believe that the world is at their feet and sky is the limit for their progress and development.

In summary, Maya's novels portray the disadvantaged women in Indian society, who break the bonds and norms that limit their freedom to fulfill their dreams and desires. These women are a striking group emerging stealthily in Indian aristocratic society, and De presents them with enthusiasm and creative energy.

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