

Shobha De's liberated Women

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Abstract

Shobha De's women are liberated ones rebelling against the established traditional norms of the patriarchal society. De's women are liberated in the sense that they often dare to step out of the confines of their homes, marriages, and families. They stand for complete freedom to women from all types of patriarchal restraints. They tirelessly struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strengths in the male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the applecart of patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves. They don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Brimming with hope and zeal, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life. The present study aims to show how liberated the women depicted by De are.

Shobha De's Liberated Women

Shobha De has been many things to many people. Her high voltage career happened in unexpected way: right from her unplanned entry as a teenager into the glamorous world of modelling to her high-profile years as a magazine editor, columnist, TV scriptwriter and author. In these incarnations she minutely observed the upcoming India. Here's a voice of a new Indian woman that speaks of choices she made, the decisions she took and the influences that shaped her.

De's women are liberated ones rebelling against the established traditional norms of the patriarchal society, in contrast to those who mutely tolerate suffering all the physical and psychological cruelties and spend all their lives in suffocated atmosphere. While the latter passively accept everything that comes to them by fate or tradition, under the notion that a woman cannot live alone, De's women are different as they do not meekly accept their subordinate position duly asserting their individuality. They resent, resist, and reject male dominance. Contrast to weak and submissive traditional Indian woman, De's woman is strong, courageous enough to get emancipated from orthodox role of women. She does not need the protection and umbrella of a male partner in her day-today routine. As a matter of fact, they easily outplay their male counterparts. The males are subdued and threatened by the self-assured and self-reliant females. Her women rebel against the traditional image of Indian women, whatever may be the field familial, social or business. They reveal the dominant picaresque element. In fact, all the novels of De appear to be the modernised version of the 18th century picaresque fiction. The picaro in her fiction is a woman who wanders from place to place in search of more fulfilling experiences. De's women are liberated in the sense that they often dare to step out of the confines of their homes, marriages, and families. They stand for complete freedom to women from all types of patriarchal restraints. The husbands feel powerless and threatened by the strange and domineering position of their women. They tirelessly struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strengths in the male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the applecart of patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves. They don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no

stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Brimming with hope and zeal, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life. Their crusade against slavery, oppression and exploitation is alarming.

In the sphere of marriage, wives are always loyal to husbands in Indian culture. But most of the husbands are disloyal to them leading their own romantic life. They demand loyalty from their wives ridiculously even though they are involved in illegitimate relationships. Shobha De's narratives descend to realistic level when she deals with the frustrated or distressed women. The element of fantasy is replaced by the commonplace realism daily life. Shobha De has presented all the facets of women. The art world has its own glamour where people follow a sort of neo-culture. Shobha De most strikingly attempts to propagate the idea that female subjectivity is not just a slavish succumbing to male dominance but every woman is a staunch feminist in her heart resisting male injustices, sometimes using her physical charm and sexuality as an unfailing weapon and ultimately it is the woman who sustains the psychologically fragmented man.

The most significant social issue that Shobha De focuses on is the infidelity in the institution of marriage. When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, the colourful picture melts gradually in front of her. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine her identity always ends up in lack of communication. At this juncture, the woman feels loneliness. In order to search for a companion, she considers another man as substitute to share her love. Mismatches always lead to destabilisation in family life. Generally, a woman gets ready for marriage, in the hope of realising all her dreams about love and pleasures of life. When she fails to achieve this marital bliss, she starts developing detachment with her partner. It leads to dislocation and displacement of their relations. When a woman is frustrated in her conjugal relationship, she is painfully and helplessly pulled into a relative and parallel relationship with another man. She considers her husband as 'other' person who is found in the wedlock.

A cursory reader of Shobha De's may misconstrue that she is to a fault pre-occupied with sex and that her women are sexually liberated and use sex on their own terms. Indisputably her images and metaphors may appear to be lewd, licentious, and crossing the limits of decency. However, most of the women depicted by De are economically

independent and socially uninhibited, besides are conscious of their self-respect. The women in her world are enterprising, bold, innovative and ever ready to face challenges. Let us now look at the 'Liberated Women' that De has depicted in her novels.

Socialite Evenings

Socialite Evenings, Shobhaa De's first novel, is about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna does not remember much of her childhood except the strict vigilance of her father. Her mother, who was preoccupied with domestic chores, does not devote much time to "know" her daughter. Karuna's life starts only when they migrate to Bombay because of her father's official transfer. She meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Karuna desires to get rid of her middle class background and shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle-rung government official.

Anjali is an independent lady, rich, confident and beautiful. She has everything the modern woman needed: French perfumes, Impala in silver grey and a fancy place in Malabar Hills. Moreover, she belongs to the world of fashion designing and advertising. This example of Anjali makes Karuna to think that the fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status in her life and would help her fulfil all her desires. So she freely indulges in the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, the middle-aged prominent socialite.

Karuna's very entry in the glamorous world of modelling and friendship with her boyfriend Bunty, is the act of rebellion against the established traditional norms of patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Karuna's psyche develops through protest and defiance. For instance, though Karuna's marriage is a complete failure she has only a formal relationship with her husband. Even she never calls her husband by his name but in a derogatory term such as a 'Black Label'. There is no intimacy between them. The relationship between them is totally deprived of mutual understanding, love and affection.

Deciding to lead a single life and to assert her individuality, Karuna divorces her husband. After her divorce, her husband meets her to express his regret and ask her to come back and live with him. He is prompted to visit her by the typical patriarchal understanding

and expectation regarding women's response in such situations. But Karuna's response is shocking and unexpected because she firmly asks her husband to go away. It is a powerful jolt to the patriarchal man. She even verbally abuses her husband when he comes with the proposal to remarry her.

Now she prefers 'friendship' to permanent subjugation and hence also rejects the proposal of Ranbir Roy. Karuna refuses to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore and hence she rebels against the patriarchal system. She resents, resists and rejects male dominance. Karuna differs considerably from Anjali and Ritu, the two other important women characters in the novel. They, like Karuna, do not challenge the patriarchal system. Though Anjali defies the traditional norms of moral values and rises to the social status of upper classes, she cannot live without husband. First she marries Abe, to get exploited and later get divorce from him. Then she marries Kumar Bhandari. However, this second marriage of Anjali changes the course of her life completely because her husband turns homosexual. In spite of this fact she does not break it. Ritu, a friend of Karuna, also leaves her husband for Gul, the underworld don, which turns her into a whore and a pimp. Thus after having suffered mentally and physically at the hands of her lover, she returns to her husband. But Ritu on the other hand invents a strategy to keep her husband within her control. The novelist presents these modern women having courage to revolt and refuse being puppets in the hands of men in the name of tradition and society.

Karuna's self-actualised portrayal reflects her longing to initiate and regulate her life on her own. Contrast to weak and submissive traditional Indian woman, she is strong, courageous enough to get emancipated from orthodox role of women. She does not need the protection and umbrella of a male partner in her day-to-day routine. She is capable and strong enough to face any adverse situation. She intends to move out and make a life for herself. She no longer needs man's attention. She keeps herself very cleverly at a safe distance from wolfish males such as Abe and Gul. Besides, as a liberated and emancipated woman, she declines Girish's offer of marriage and also remains unaffected by Varun's threats. Varun's association with politicians, journalists and underworld could not make her move from the path she has chosen.

All women presented in *Socialite Evenings* are attractive and self-assured. They are well aware of their own strengths and are also clever enough to hide their weaknesses. They are happy with wealth, and the pleasures which they could buy with money and the freedom.

Starry Nights

Shobha De, as a journalist and magazine editor, was closely associated with the world of Mumbai Cinema. Therefore, she knows well about the dark life behind the screen, with all its ugly, dirty details. It is this life that finds expression in *Starry Nights*. All the women characters presented in the novel such as Aasha Rani, Sudha Rani, Rita and Malini, in one way or the other, are related to the world of films. Aasha Rani journeys from a small town background to the tinsel world of Bombay. In order to emerge as a top heroine, she utilizes every opportunity by breaking up the traditional shackles. De in this novel suggests that the only way a woman like Aasha Rani can reach the ladder of success is 'Sex'.

Starry Nights is the story of the struggle and survival of a woman in a sex-starved society. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realise that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness.

The novel is also a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, glamour, crimes, lies, and deceits and sexual exploitation. Though sex and glamour may be the means to seek success, it is admitted that many women strive hard to strengthen themselves as artists. The new woman is ready to sacrifice her 'physical self' in order to climb the ladder of success in the form of money and fame. But many women fail in their hasty attempts in this direction so they end up as prostitutes. When this novel has attempted to explore the hard-core reality lurking in the corporate high society, De has faced protest from the men who are unable to accept the truth.

Sisters

In *Sisters*, Shobha De explains the theme of the new woman who attempts to assert herself in this mischievous world. Unlike its predecessors, *Sisters* for the first time deals with the psychic conflict in its, liberated woman-protagonist who is caught between a 'personal self' and a

'societal self'. The novel thus focuses as much on the seamy side of the business life as on the inner turmoil of the protagonist.

For several chapters this story about a very rich, young US-returned Gujarati heiress Mikki Hiralal who has a great and expensive dress sense but can't tell a man from a monster, careens along without tripping over four-letter words or situations. Her industrialist father and minor-princess-mother have just died in an airplane crash, their private plane.

Mikki has a half-sister Alisha who hates Mikki as she has the Hiralal name and money. But as the story progresses, Mikki loses her money while the sister turns from a slightly trampy and bitter 19-year-old into a rich real estate promoter. From her fabulous new house she can see the top of Mikki's bungalow, a fact which is for her the height of revenge. As the story progresses, Alisha goes through drugs, men, tantrums, slashed wrists, born-again religion and an intense love affair with a Malayalee doctor.

The structure of the novel is cinematic with its climax, being reminiscent of one of the most make-believe scenes of the modern pop cinema. But *Sisters*, which covers four years in the life of Mallika, is a fine study in the traumatic experiences of a woman caught up in the whirlpool of complex human situations. The narration, simple and direct, adds to the authenticity of the story. *Sisters* unfolds the life story of two sisters – Mikki, the legitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal and Alisha, the illegitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal and Leelabehn.

The transformation of Mikki from a mere social butterfly to a mature woman and to a kindly mother-figure is apparent when she turns her attention towards her estranged sister. Mikki's encounter with different men helps her grow into an independent-minded woman, while Alisha, failing to get any hint from her experience, becomes an introvert. Ironically, Mikki and Alisha are united only after the death of the latter's mother. With her motherly affection, Mikki attempts to soothe the wounded self of her sister. She helps her get over all the emotional hurdles in her life. The novel comes to an end with both the sisters realising the need to live together.

Strange Obsession

Shobha De's explosive novel revolves around the life and lustful relationship of two young women, Amrita and Meenakshi. Fundamentally, it seems to be a psychological documentation of sexual obsession of mysterious woman Meenakshi, also known as Minx and her calamitous end. Both represent the different kinds of topology of modern urban set up. They seem to be hardly better than school girls playing adult games. It is through their behaviour and conversations that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of these two young women-Minx and Amrita.

In *Strange Obsessions* Shobha De reiterates the theory that a woman gets real peace and security only in the home of her husband. It is the story of Amrita Aggarwal, a young beautiful super model of Bombay. Within months of her arrival in Bombay, she is the envy of its beautiful people. Then, one day, she attracts the attentions of a mysterious woman called Minx. As the months pass by and the demands of her unwelcome suitor grow, Amrita's life turns nightmare. It is an unforgettable novel of sexual obsession and its consequences. In *Strange Obsession* Shobha De observes keenly the surface reality that can be seen in the urban rich class families.

Feminists believe that natural relationships substantiate the domination of man in the patriarchal society. The presence of man makes woman feel submissive and in a way it reveals woman's oppression. In order to liberate herself from the clutches of male hegemony, she challenges patriarchy acknowledging lesbianism. Lesbianism cannot be seen as an act of subversion. It is a complete woman's world. It is observed in lesbianism - the absence of man, of no sisterhood and no universal womanhood. The survival over patriarchy is, in fact, important for them. It allows woman to heal the wounds outside the spectrum of patriarchy.

At times, unattended and uncared for girls resort to lesbianism. It is a means of security and comfort for them. Estranged daughter-parent relationships cause disturbance that result in unnatural relationships. Meenkshi Iyengar (Minx) is a prototype for this kind of disturbed psyche in the novel. She is the disturbed child of a Police Commissioner and suffers from indifference from her parents in sharing her claims and love. Hence she decides to involve in a strange relationship like lesbianism with a model named Amrita. The financial

autonomy in the elite circles makes lesbian life possible. This sort of strange relationship impacts the lives of the subjects as a whole and helps them to resolve their psychological problems. In the case of Amrita and Minx, lesbianism is a strange obsession found in the world of modelling. It is a means of victimisation and exploitation for the aspirants in the glamour world.

Shobha De explores the concealed realities in the glitz world. The dreams of innocent girls who wish to enter movies and modelling are shattered and exploited in this novel. It is not presented as an issue of challenge in the case of Amrita. She is forcibly dragged to the web of lesbianism to survive in the modelling world. These kinds of relationships also lead to the destruction of one's own personality and career. They do not take it as a means of protection.

Like her other novels, Shobha De brings out the absurdities of life in high-society of Bombay. De treats the subject of sex elaborately; the sadistic homosexual tendencies of Minx present the height of alternative sexuality.¹

Sultry Days

In *Sultry Days*, Shobha De depicts a woman who defies male domination suppressing her individual urges. The novel has women who are obsessed with men; they, too, indulge in beating men at their own game. *Sultry Days* depicts the shady side of urban rich class society, where sex and power play a vital role in the lives of the protagonist, Deb (nicknamed God) and his friend, Nisha. We also come across some glimpses of commitment, thereby giving credence to the fact that not all writings of Shobha De are 'aberrations' and that there is a possibility of even her returning to the mainstream of writing after a few 'sallies'.²

Sultry Days is again the story of the shady side of Mumbai upper class society. The main protagonist, Deb has a ruthless policy towards women. He always wishes to use them and throw them out after having sexual gratification with them. The element of fantasy is

¹ Vats, Naresh. K: "The Escape: Strange Obsession" in *Shobha De: A Critical Response*, p. 104

² Shrivastava, Sharad: "Return of Shobha De to the Mainstream 'New Woman': A Study of *Sultry Days*" in *The Fiction of Shobha De*, p. 233-34

replaced by the real life incidents appear in daily life. It is observed in the severed relations between Nisha and Deb in *Sultry Days*. When Nisha feels that Deb is no longer committed to their relationship, she senses her days sultry and so she decides to live life in her own way.

Sultry Days infers that a woman with a fully integrated personality, can face the challenges to solve many problems in her life and she need not be a victim, a fact manifested through the powerfully drawn character of Nisha, who initially worked in an advertising agency subsequently adopting the career of a journalist. Marriage is not regarded as essential in *Sultry Days*.

Some of the girls are naturally captivated by heroic deeds of riff-raffs at college level in the Indian urban context. As a result, they neglect their academic pursuit to enjoy every pore of the society they live in. But it always becomes a world of fantasy bereft of reality. Nisha is a prototype of ordinary womanhood. She loves Deb at college but he fails to reciprocate her love seriously. Hence, she denies no knowledge in academics and derives joy in love with Deb. His life is dry as he believes in plastic passions. It causes much agony for the inner self of Nisha.

Woman considers love seriously rather than man in the Indian context. She is ready to sacrifice her interests for the sake of her lover. Though she faces the cold attitude of her lover, most of the women never resign from their affectionate relations. She waits for change in him till the end of her life. Nisha does not change her attention from Deb though he is a man of moods.

In the urban set-up, some women become victims to the flirtations of wayward men. Deb has several girls by the time he is in the second year at college. A woman generally is sincere in loving rather than man. She always derives determination and courage out of love for her lover.

Sultry Days presents couples giving us a glimpse of husband-wife relationship in the metropolis of our country. Nisha the narrator protagonist observes the husband-wife relationship, which her parents share. Being a corporate executive and a family patriarch too, her father is engrossed in his work and realises that he no longer commands the respect of his wife and this could be due to the existence of a mistress. Through the character of Deb,

Shobha De brings out how the needy people in the glamour world face dreadful situation though they have artistic talent in real life. In this novel, De brings out the complex games that appear in the high-class society where woman's role is presented as a catalyst.

Snapshots

Shobha De intends to heal the injuries of female psyche in her imaginative fictional world through free and frank treatment of sex in marital bliss and sex as a curse in premarital or post-marital life. However, her heroines fight for equality in a dogmatic and patriarchal Indian society.

When *Snapshots* was first published it created a sensation among the reading public and Shobha De was accused of sensual titillation due to her bold sexual imagery and vivid expression of pre-marital, extra-marital, incestuous and lesbian relationships. This novel centres on the reunion of a group of school friends several years later in life, most of whom are married women. The get-together of the friends is arranged on the insistence of Swati, requesting her friends telephonically to bring snapshots of their schooldays. The get-together of these 'Sisters of the Subcontinent' at the house of one of them, Reema, begins well. Despite their problems and initial resistance, they all attend it. There is so much to catch on and memories start to surface – some happy, others bittersweet and some downright poisonous. As Swati, the spirit behind this get-together, tells them:

*We aren't here just to chit-chat, I want to know everything about everybody from the time we left school. Every single dirty detail. What happened to all the boyfriends? Where did the schools crushes go? And the breathless infatuations?*³

Infidelity, incest, rape, lies and even death and the evil that lurks beneath the apparently placid everyday lives of these six women form the substance of the novel appropriately called *Snapshots*. These women represent different kinds of urban women in India.

*They are hardly better than "schoolgirls playing adult games"*⁴

³ *Snapshots*, 90

⁴ *Snapshots*, 181

Forced to confront dark secrets that they thought lay buried deep in the past, these women begin to turn against one another and the mood of the party turns nightmarish, ending with the suicide of one of them. It is through their behaviour and conversation that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of women in India.

Significantly enough, the term 'power' and its synonyms have been reiteratively used in 'Snapshots'. "Who would know about the power game, Never give yourself to any man for free, you know why? Men don't value anything they get so easily. That's why we are here, to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over us you and me. If they buy your sex, pay for you, they feel like kings. Give it to them with love for nothing and they'll kick you in the gut."⁵

Second Thoughts

Shobha De's next novel *Second Thoughts* demonstrates a candid study of woman's imbroglio in the contemporary Indian metropolitan society while she struggles to find a solution between tradition and modernity. The arranged marriage between Ranjan Malik, an America-trained business executive from Bombay and Maya, an educated, freedom-loving girl from Calcutta is doomed to failure because of their entirely different attitudes to life. A departure from her earlier novels, *Second Thoughts* is a bitter sweet love story of the nineties. The high society, which was the familiar background of the novels, has been replaced by middle class society.

Second Thoughts is the story of a young and attractive middle-class woman Maya, who gets married to Ranjan. When Ranjan becomes a cold sexual partner, Maya breaks the chains of social morality and indulges in a relationship with Nikhil. In the novel, the city of Bombay offers two prototypes namely Ranjan and Maya. Being a Bengali, Maya leads her life in a world of fantasy and fascination in Bombay, but not with realities of life. This leads to fascination about romance in the marriage. Maya and Ranjan's marital life is punctuated all along by matrimonial indifference. Maya thinks that her husband understands little of her

⁵ De, Shobhaa: "Sex in the Time of Stress" in Kushwant Singh & Shobhaa De (Eds), *Uncertain Liaisons, Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India*, New Delhi, Viking / Penguin Books India, 1993, p. 6

aspirations. She fails to maintain balance in between fantasy and reality. She is sexually frustrated so that she is slowly alienated from her husband. Maya waits for Ranjan to respond to her advances, her biological needs and her claims. When he does not fulfil her erotic fantasies, she gets frustrated and finds temporary solace in her neighbouring boy Nikhil who satisfies her emotional and physical cravings. She deems Ranjan as other person whom she meets accidentally in her path of life.

Shobha De reveals the fact that the longings of a woman should be answered in the wedlock. When she realises that that the wedlock hinders her aspirations, she tries to escape from it. She revolts against the denial of life and seeks shelter in the lap of another man. In the upper class families of the urban society, the woman has little patience to bear the passive and cold attitude of her husband. Hence she resorts to second thoughts to satisfy urges of her inner self. In the case of Maya, she soothes her inner self under the canopy of Nikhil's presence. Unfortunately, she feels Nikhil as her true lover. In the pursuit of searching for the husband substitute, she loses her husband, Ranjan to some extent. In the end, she is forced to confront reality when her dreams are cracked up. As a result, she also foregoes Nikhil who is an opportunist to exploit her situation.

Maya suffers due to her financial dependence on Ranjan. Shobha De captures the middle class psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan - his attitude to hold on tight to the purse strings so as to control his woman, his lectures on wifely duties, and his complete control even on the use of the air-conditioner. Further, the woman is not allowed to know the enveloped secrets of familial life until she experiences it. But the postmodern woman is able to explore them without any hesitation. Maya's tragedy is that she is treated like a figure made of an 'alabaster' and not of 'flesh and blood' before marriage by her mother and after marriage by her husband.

Conclusion

Shobha De has marvellous understanding of the psyche of women. There is no essential category of woman to which her women characters belong. In her novels she rather accommodates and depicts a variety of women with no category to be all inclusive or absolute. There are not only traditional and modern women that figure in her fictional world

but also women representing lesbians, middle-class women, women cloning male behaviour. The novelist does not project any category of women or perspective to be the ultimate. Moreover, De presents as an impassive observer, through her novels, the surface reality that can be seen in the urban-rich class families, and more importantly an ostensibly intimate view of the glitzy side of Bombay life and the attendant absurdities, where sex and power play a vital role, where life is dry and filled with plastic passions.

Although De, in her writings, handled quite dextrously the issues of male chauvinism, the non-acceptance of a liberated woman by the traditional Indian society, the growing question of sexual, familial, and individual dilemma, she is much criticised for the presentation of women who wander about indulging in free sex, and living fashionable and wealthy life. However, she in no way seems to support the way of life adopted by these so called modern women. On the contrary, she shows her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour in a clear and effective way. Her prime concern seems to be marriage and allied to the issue of marriage is the issue of sex. There is a great deal of sexual freedom in her women if not sexual promiscuity. She has depicted this brash, affluent ambitious India with an altogether distinct touch. The misunderstanding regarding her feminist stance possibly can be associated with her presentation of women who indulge in uninhibited sex and unusual social activities. The recurring depiction of these women's behaviour and the minute details related to the sex act experienced by these women falsely create the impression that De is suggesting their life style as a model for women to experience real happiness, total freedom and an independent existence. But a careful study of her novels reveals the hidden motive in depiction of such bizarre life. It cannot be ascertained from the pronounced statements of her characters or from the activities in which these women participate. It may be deduced from the ultimate fate they are condemned to as a result of their indulgence in unusual activities and deviant behaviour.