

MULTI-FACETS OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE

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ABSTRACT: *Shobha De, an eminent modern novelists and journalists, becomes the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. These women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit. Marriage for them is an insurance against social values. For instance in her novel **Socialite Evenings**, Karuna is such a woman who declines to follow the traditional path. She suggests through her women characters in **Starry Nights** that, whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously, flout morality in the name of their struggle for success in life, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. And in her novel **Strange Obsession**, Shobha De is rejecting and deconstructing man-made images of women and an alternative female identity is created where a woman sometimes take the role of man and another takes the role of a 'free woman'. One might say that gender identities cannot be changed or exchanged at will. But Shobha De's women characters are very good specimens which openly establish that reversal of roles are indeed possible for women in the present day society. These multiple shades of woman's mind and plight are dealt in this paper exclusively.*

KEY WORDS: *Extra-marital affairs, feminism, sex, marriage, sadism, obsession and morality*

This paper articulates varied facets of women who denied freedom to act and live according to their will. Shobha De, the first to explore the world of urban women of higher social strata, analyses the possibility of a total independence for a women beyond the constraints of a patriarchal society and the conditions imposed by her own biological nature. Shobha De's elite and educated women of the upper class family are trapped in the social institution of the marriage for the sake of money and honour. Marriage and family restricts the social position of Shobha De's women in the novel "*Socialite Evenings*". As the story unfolds the life of these women, we find the sexual liberties of Anjali who at last seeks solace in religion after her second marriage with Kumar, an impotent and incompatible man; the gorgeous and vivacious Ritu who has developed flirting into a fine art and who leaves her second husband for a smuggler; Si, a highly immoral character and unhappy socialite and Karuna, the protagonist of the novel, a prominent Bombay Socialite belongs to a middle class Brahmin family that falls within rigid

patriarchal norms, trying to escape from the boredom of marriage and childbirth. The concepts of sexual behaviour of the heroine differ from that of friends and parents.

Karuna's disappointment with her husband nourished her fantasy of a liberated woman. The drastic changes initiated by the elite women of the upper society within the patriarchal setup thrilled her. She says:

Women it seemed for the first time could have control over their lives. The scene was changing even in Bombay. Women work, women married, women divorced and women remained single (De, SE: 65)

Soon she realized that her marriage was a failure because of her choice of a wrong person who was "unexciting, untutored" (De, SE: 65). Men have always exercised enormous power over women through controlling their sexuality and reproduction. In traditional societies, women had no rights to take decision on mothering. De's heroine soars above the patriarchal limits by venturing rights upon her sexuality as Karuna herself admit the naiveté of the husband and the denuded anger that made the wives miserable. However, her reproductive freedom had not made her happy. Realizing her status as a dependent doll, Karuna, at one time, felt humiliated and considered that she wasn't 'wife material'. So she opted out for her own way.

Karuna's freaking out with Krish and her pregnancy in the aftermath had brought her dilemma to an end. Her decision to remain single after abortion opened up new vistas to her life. Though the inborn motherhood in her confounded her before abortion, her desire to get relieved from all roots of women's oppression succeeded at last. She was not taken back when her mother threatened her with her biological changes in the features of an unmothered woman:

You will get a beard by the time you reach forty. And then you will regret your decision (De, SE: 106).

Karuna's reply to her mother that electrolysis was cheaper than children was an indication of her firm faith in liberation. Comparing her own predicament with that of her sister, Karuna envied the freedom of her sister from an unhappy marriage while her own married life was a play of a witness little charade matching with the life sentence of her mother as a domesticated wife. Her sister's daring step ignited a spark into her.

The emotional conflicts between Karuna and her husband before taking up the decision to remain single affirm the mutual expectations of a man and a woman from each other. The little patch of independence after divorce gave Karuna the freedom of action. To her mother's insistence on getting married to the right one for a secured life, she replied that she was at peace with herself minding her business. Her acceptance of her smugness ended up her conversation with her mother as:

I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. I like and respect Girish. We share a lot of common interest. But I am not sure I'll make a good wife to him. Or he is a good husband to me. Perhaps we are both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any sacrifices – not now (De, SE:276)

Crossing the barriers of patriarchy might have given Karuna the thrill and happiness of a carefree life. It could have brought Karuna on par with men but her stand does not provide any solution to a woman's responsibility as a biological reproducer. Karuna might have gained access to abortion, birth control and employment and had become totally a liberated individual. She couldn't but accept that her single status "isn't the standard attitude". (De, SE: 305)

Different feminist theories give varied reasons as the roots of women's oppression. Through Karuna, De presents the picture of an emancipated heroine whose financial independence gives way to social independence and sexual freedom.

Next, Shobha De's *Starry Nights*, the most controversial novel, 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 realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness. As a feminine novelist and journalist, she has marvelous understanding of the psyche of women and therefore, she explores the world of especially urban woman with all its overwhelming problems and challenges in her novel *Starry Nights*. In the novel *Starry Nights*, mainly three women characters, Geetha Devi, Malini, Aasha Rani, and Sudha's sufferings have been depicted with marvelous realism. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the applecart of pharisaical patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves. As Shobha De's women don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Struggling hard with hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tear-filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge the society to turn the tide in their favour. 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. With powerful strokes of her narrative technique, Shobha De suggests in *Starry Nights* that consciously or unconsciously women have always fought for their identity but in modern times the mode of struggle has changed. Women break all the barriers to assert themselves but they still demand that what they have always desired, i.e., protection, love, care, compassion and understanding. Their journey no doubt is arduous but their indomitable will and undefeatable spirit compels them to carry on their struggle.

Starry Nights took the literary world by storm for its frank portrayal of sex and exploitation. Glittering world of Bombay cinema beckons many young girls, bubbling with ambition and lust for power and self. Before they achieve their goal, they have to pass through

the dark tunnels of sexploitation and never ending sufferings, which result in loneliness, frustration and disaster.

Shobha De realistically articulates the experience of the protagonist of the novel, Aasha Rani and other women characters like Geetha Devi, Sudha, Malini and Rita as manifestation of oppression in the chauvinistic society; they suffer in their lives at the hands of men in one-way or the other. First of all, Geetha Devi, mother of Aasha Rani, has suffered a lot as she was abandoned by her husband to fight with poverty and deprivation with three girls to rise. She had even to prostitute to continue dance lessons for Aasha Rani as well as to support the family.

Next the novel beautifully provides Akshay's wife Malini, who when cheated by her husband, came out of their homes, cry out loud and sack related women to win back her lost husbands at any cost. Malini's marriage, supposed to provide her with love, care and understanding, is a fiasco as it works only through sex. Akshay needs sex and also wants variety, therefore loses interest in Malini who can't fulfill his demands. Through Malini and others, the novelist seems to suggest that mostly actors in Film industry are unfaithful in their family life and therefore their wives have the stories of sadism, mental and physical cruelty and humiliation to tell. Wives are generally treated as commodities.

Thirdly, Sudha, Aasha Rani's younger sister, is different from Aasha Rani in the sense that she is very selfish. As she has no pricking conscience, she can stoop to any depth to axe her own grid. Once she becomes a star, she hardly cares hysterical mother and thinks about her family. She never bothers about heel chair Appa. But she also meets a horrifying disaster due to her inordinate ambition. She had borrowed heavily to launch a film for herself and Amar. Out of greed, she manipulated the accounts and reaped tragedy for herself. Her murder was attempted by setting fire on the road where she could be somehow saved to be admitted in the hospital with sixty percent burns. She realizes her mistake at last and confesses:

God has punished me. It is nothing else but that I deserve it. I have been evil. I have sinned. I have done so much harm. Just let me die (De, SN: 232)

Finally, Aasha Rani, the protagonist of *Starry Nights* is a suffering soul since her childhood. The very birth of Aasha Rani was a bitter agony. In her childhood, deprived of parental love, protection, closeness and emotional security, Aasha Rani had to face starvation and poverty. Owing to the lack of fatherly protection, she underwent traumatic experiences at the hands of her uncle. But she was most mercilessly used by her own mother, who instead of acting as her savior, further pushed her into hell to support her family. The girl, who didn't want to kill her conscience to break the barriers of morality, was forcibly made a money making machine in her youth. Tears roll down the cheeks of Aasha Rani, when she leaves for Bombay. Like a caged bird, she is forced to perform in porno session. If ever she resisted, her mother cruelly struck her.

Before porno session, she helplessly cries, protests and repeatedly requests amma to save her life. The moments still stand afresh in her memory.

Amma please don't. Iam sacred. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers (De, SN: 53)

Ironically, Aasha Rani is first exploited by her own mother who opens for her gate to hell. Aasha Rani realizes that the world she had stepped in was very cruel. To sign for big banners with top most heroes, was possible only if she readied herself to be used. Ultimately Aasha Rani becomes a perfect film star to enjoy the blaze of flash bulbs. But she never forgets the shallowness and meaninglessness of her life, devoid of real joy and contentment. Her aversion for people grows with each experience in the film industry. Aasha Rani's marriage proves that it cannot guarantee love and security to a woman because women are more sensitive, sentimental, and possessive as well as demanding. At every step of her life, Aasha Rani falls a victim to the nefarious designs of men as she thinks:

Whichever way one looked at it, there was a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman (De, SN: 157)

However, Aasha Rani does not display a new sensibility to enable her to protest against male chauvinism. Grilled in the mill of sexploitation, she lets herself be crushed in the multiple sex encounters. In *Starry Nights*, Shobha De articulates bitter realities of the life of women like Geetha Rani, Malini, Sudha and Aasha Rani through varied facets of feminism in keeping with contemporary feminist critical theories.

With the advent of feminism, each and every female oriented subject has become an issue of contemporary literary debate. Earlier the concept of woman was centered on the stereotyped images of maternal caring and emotions. Now it has been proved that this is not the whole truth. There is the other side of the picture too, in which she has been projected as murderer, criminal, etc. Shobha De's novel *Strange Obsession* is a strong case where we have specimens of a woman who is the victimizer and another who is the victim. In *Strange Obsession*, Amrita, the heroine of the novel, aspires to be a supermodel. In order to fulfill her dreaming aspiration she decides to shift from Delhi to Bombay. In the beginning of the novel, Amrita has been projected as an ambitious girl completely governed by her reality principle of the instinct. She aspires to be the subject. On the other hand, Amrita is oppressed by the rule of Minx, a woman who refashions herself in the novel and presented as a materialistic, lusty and liberated figure. It is ironic that Amrita, the responsible young lady becomes a mere tool in the hands of Minx almost throughout the novel. Initially she was one who believed that she was a supermodel who would be able to beat anyone in the field. She took pride in her beauty and was almost crazy about her dress. She was an attractive, ambitious and glamorous model who was lucky and blessed. She was centre of attraction even when she was very young. Her meeting with Minx turned out to be a turning

point in her life. In the earlier stages, Amrita used every opportunity to show her disgust at Minx when she began to chase Amrita like a bloodhound.

No matter what tricks you try, you'll never be able to fool me. I hate youDid you hear that? Hate you! Hate you! Hate you! (De, SO: 29)

Amrita had repeatedly tried to make clear her position that women having love affairs with women were something unusual and abnormal. But Minx was never in a mood to listen to her whenever she tried to “sermonize”. Minx tried to get Amrita’s sympathy by concocting incredible stories as to how she was ill-treated even by her father in the most unbelievable way. Minx continued to harass her and she laid a trap from which she was never going to escape. Under the influence of libidinal instinct Minx forces Amrita to develop a strange relationship with her which turns Amrita’s life into nightmarish. Her unwelcomed relationship with Minx turns her into no sex. She neither gets both the name and the fame of the first sex nor does she remain the second sex. She ends into nothing. Her psyche is in control of a lesbian who appears to be more tyrannical than a man. Minx has changed Amrita’s life completely. She is completely frustrated and wants to leave her ambition and go back to her place. She wants to overcome the situation but,

There was no way she could undo it now. No way could she reverse what had transpired between Minx and her..... She also knew that she would have to live with one big regret for the rest of her life (De, SO:105)

There are two types of lesbian as categorized by Simone de Beauvoir. The first category is masculine who imitates man. The second category is feminine who is afraid of male. Simone is of the opinion that female who are maltreated and neglected by the society usually performing the active role. In order to compensate her inferiority she adds virile qualities in her mode of behavior. Minx comes to the category of masculine lesbian, who in her mysterious relationship with Amrita performs the active role. She appears to be absolute invert who wants to possess Amrita completely. She cannot tolerate Amrita’s relation with Rover. He has not only been beaten but also been scared of death by the man of Minx. In her relationship she is governed by the anti-social force of her characteristic instinct named as Id, which has turned her attitude into sadism. Id, the source of all our passions instinct and habits, strives continually to gratify them.

Amrita’s relation with Minx is based on the pleasure principle only. Though Amrita’s superego forbids her to indulge in this relation, she is consciously aware of her critical position made by Minx. With all her consciousness Amrita protests,

I'm not going to spend the rest of my life being controlled by a pervert. And forget it – I won't come back to Bombay with you. Neither will I stay in your home – what nerve! (De, SO:118)

Amrita's attitude has finally laid the foundation of their friction. She does not get emotional satisfaction. She always feels guilty of this hollow relationship. She wants to overcome of this situation. She dreams of a male who will perform the role of savior. Whenever she gets a chance to meet a male she starts assuming that she would very soon be out of all this kinky game of Minx. Now the subjective instinct of Amrita's character appears to be taking a turn into objective instinct. She fails to overcome of common feminine attitude which desires nothing but a male. Ultimately Amrita's parents decide to take her out of this situation by arranging her marriage with Rakesh. When Amrita leaves Minx finally, Minx fails to adjust with the circumstances. Her obsession towards Amrita turns her into psychoneurotic. Shobha De describes her pathetic condition

“Minx resembled a ghost: her hair disheveled, her clothes grubby and torn, her expression ravaged her words crazed. She ‘d lost not less than ten kilos and her slim figure looked wasted skeleton, I can’t live without her” she said and collapsed on her door step (De, SO: 162)

Minx fails to achieve anything in the world and her mysterious story ends with her death under unknown tragic circumstances. Her obsession towards Amrita has made her sinner which is redeemed only with her death. In the struggle between the first and the second sex, Amrita fails to revive her identity as a woman. She appears to be self defeating psyche because she fails to preserve the value of her own identity and behaviour.

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