

## From Marginalised to Main Stream: Emergence of New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De

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Shobha De is one of those Indian English writers who occupy a distinctive place as a journalist as well as novelist in the literary world of India. With the publication of her debut novel *Socialite Evening*, De entered the literary limelight in India and became one of India's top best-selling authors with a couple of novels to her credit. She is always one of those modern day women authors who are now expressing themselves freely and boldly creating a new image of the woman. In fact, De endeavors to present the new woman who is daring, ambitious and aspiring and is obsessed with realizing her dreams and forcing them upon the male dominated world with a view to obtaining a due recognition of her identity. Being a feminist writer, De's novels raise a strong protest against the male dominated Indian society where women are considered as mere shadow of men and treated as the other. However, in this fast changing world, the role of women in the society, too, has been changing fast and affecting greatly the social norms or mores prevalent in the society. Indian writers and especially Indian Women writers have risen to the occasion and are adequately reflecting the condition of women and their hopes and aspirations in literature. However, Male writers have also written about women's issues but female writers are writing with an 'insider's knowledge', bringing into focus the exploitation and marginalization of women.

Almost all the novels of Shobha De centers on the theme of marginality prevailing in our society be it man-woman relations, caste-class divide, gender discrimination/ biases or women and voiceless people. De, in her novels, seriously questions as to the gravity of the injustices meted out to the marginal people and the hypocrisy of the so called urban

India. The controversial issues and the challenges thereupon on the society are likely to make a change of heart of educated middle class India. The term marginalization refers to individual or groups who live at the margin of society. Their situations may be historical or cultural as they suspend between social classes or cultural groups, without being fully integrated to it. The term has different connotations and nuances in the modern era of post colonial, postmodern period and in a world that is predominantly driven by market forces. In cultural anthropology marginalization is a major subject of study in which ethnic groups and their social situations are studied. It may have various forms like class, caste, gender, community and so on at one level and at the other level groups who are subjected to economic and social hardships. These groups may still be marginalised at multiple levels in a country like India which has witnessed tremendous socio-political changes in both pre-independence and post independence period. The present research paper deals with the issue of gender marginality or gender biases particularly in Indian social set up.

## Methodology

The present research paper makes primary use of a number of different passages selected at random from Shobha De's selected novels as its primary data sources to culminate itself in a qualitative research study. To be more specific, the novels of De studied and evaluated are *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Snapshots*, and *Second Thoughts* in order to better comprehend and interpret the topic. The secondary data is gathered from a wide variety of online and offline sources In order to accomplish this goal of delivering Shobha De's most up-to-date thoughts on the matter addressed in the research paper. Characterization created by Sobha De is significant for the importance placed on the protagonists' existing mental states in each instance.

## Shobha De and the Concept of New Woman

Shobha De is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women in the society. Her novels represent the new Indian woman's voice. A 'New woman' is in search of self-identity,

seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. She does not believe in depicting her women protagonists as slaves. But she is the first to explore the world of urban women of higher social strata. A closer study of her novels reveals her protest against the image of woman as an auxiliary. She destroys this distorted and deteriorated image of woman and therefore, the women protagonists in her novels appear more powerful and crave for their quest for self identity in the society where the men dominate. They always expect something new experiences and other worldly pleasures. The newly existing freedom of women give them pride and brutal attitudes especially marriage and family. The modern woman is not only enjoying new found freedom but conceives themselves as the acute business personalities. These horrible personalities of modern women have breath taking impact on the male sector. In Shobha De's world of fiction the protagonist women are not at all tranquil and compliant but having high spirit in self progress. These women motivate themselves to achieve the position to control the society instead of tolerating the abuses at the hands of men. As we dive into the fictional world of Shobha De we can understand the way in which modern women emerging Indian society.

The question arises who is a new woman. Can a modern educated emancipated woman be called a 'new woman'? Everyone has a different definition of 'a new woman'. In the words of Vijay Laxmi Seshadri, "The new woman is assertive and self-willed searching to discover her true self". So a new woman is one who has or knows the value system and knows the score she has to remit in fixing these values in patriarchal society. Not every modern woman is called 'a new woman'. It is rather painstaking to be a new woman because she vindicates her own self and demands her rights. She fights against the schemes of things like social, moral and cultural norms. She even retaliates the use of thought patterns nourished under the influence of male-dominated order. She derives pleasures from insisting her own self, her thoughts, her norms, and the way of her own behaviour. A New Woman is an

enterprising ambitious and individualistic personality in thought and action who in De's novels finally demands attention equality and peace on par not with women but with men. The purpose of this paper is to study new women in the novel of Shobha De. Women under patriarchy are the victims of too much oppression and suppression. They are discriminated and bruised in lieu of their sex. The lives women live are demonstrated in the writings of Shobha De.

Shobha De exhibits her women characters a combination of boldness in physical, mental, sexuality, career and marriage life. She does not want her women characters mere a Traditional and help mate or simply pleasure given instrument or slaves. De portrays her own feminist and sexist mindset in her most novels. We come to know through her novels that women characters are superior to men. In 20th century fictions women are having free thinking and also their own choice for sexuality. De presented totally different problems which a Traditional woman faced, because they are all middle class ordinary traditional class women. But she depicts modern women at social milieu in different angle and in openness in her narrations. It is totally differs that modern women characters are educated and they hold a well placed in society. De proves that among the social milieu the women characters stand equal to men in the society. We can see the social milieu in their every part of their life like marriage, men-women relationship, and family and presentation female sexuality as shown in De's fiction.

### **New Women Approach towards Sex and Marriage**

Traditionally, marriage is a union of two persons of full development. Shobha De's modern women typically played the roles of sharer of husbands love and affection, the mother of the children and the partner of performances and ceremonies. They are no more the typically traditional women who were pictured as submissive, sufferer, a mother, a wife, daughter, and a cog in family machine by the other female writers. In De's novels the marriage is described with all bareness lurking behind it. Shobha De believes that the marriage ceremony is considered as a sacred bond between the husband and wife but today this bondage has

no capability to bring pleasures and peace both in individual and social life. In the contemporary era every relationship is influenced by money and power likewise the marriages also influenced by these criteria.

In the novel *Sisters* Mikky, the character, is tempted to get married to Naveen only because of his money not for love. She prefers him as she thinks, "He may help me with Hiralal Industries" (62). Likewise in the same novel Binny tries to get Mikky in marriage in order to obtain in all the wealth of Mikky. In the same way Anjali and Karuna in *Socialite Evening*, Asha Rani in *Starry Night*, and Maya in *Second Thought* have experienced the bareness in their marriage life. De's women characters are having no such personal aptitude and morals with them. In fact, these women never enjoyed sex with their husband as thinking sex is a boring one and terrible; even they do not worried having sex with other men apart from their husband. R.S. Pathak rightly comments on marriage in Shobha De's fiction as "Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable promiscuous life which can be terminated at anytime depending upon the whims of the partners" (Pathak).

Shobha De was criticized by many critics that she treats the sex in hard and rough terms in her novels. De also depicts sex apart from emotions and love; even though she has displayed sex as a mechanical function. She displayed this kind of sexual emotions in her fictional novels through marriage life and man and women relationship. In De's novels the women characters are not ashamed to satisfy their sexual urge through extra-marital relationships. They decide to live what they want and whom they have to live with without bothering about the terms of Traditional chastity. They do not want to be live like the traditional women's like Sitha, Savitri and Anusaya. The modern woman made their identity notable by utilising the sex where ever it is necessary. They also realize that how the society oppresses them when they are in their improving stage and it made some sort of awareness among them. They used their beds as a weapon against few social issues they faced. Hence, in the novel *Starry Nights* Shobha De's women such as Aasha Rani, Rita, Linda, Shonali and others frankly discuss and practice sex. The woman

like Aasha Rani enslaves the men and becomes successful by utilizing sex as a weapon.

De reveled in her few novels about sex that men used their sexual activity to control and conquer the body and mind of women. It is not merely enjoyment instead of it became disillusionment. De admits and exposed in her novels that, ‘yes, the sex in the books is quite grim... It’s unhappy sex seen from a fairy lonely women’s point of view. Some people, however, find sex seen from a woman’s view point so threatening that it’s much easier to dismiss it as sleaze’, It shows to actual purpose of sex that shown in her novels. De’s novels revel that the man and women relationship in sexual activity is mostly not real but it is a fictional world among them as well as it leads in to frustration. She does not depict it for a purpose of sensational reading but it shows the hollowness in the world of sexuality both in the family and social life. De does not praise or fully support the free sexual activities of her characters in her novels.

De also mocks the free sexual activities of modern women through her fiction. She depicts that the modern women folk has not only the freedom of living independently but they can have heterosexual and lesbian relationship or moreover even mechanical in high society. According to De the above-mentioned sexual activities are not emotional or love or mutual understanding at all. These activities will not give any natural satisfaction and peace since it is artificial one. The real happiness is mutual understanding between two souls not only psychical urge.

## **Emergence of New woman**

The birth of “new woman” in India is a reality as the idea and state of womanhood has changed in the contemporary scenario. This new woman is an integration of western manipulations as well as her native culture. She is a hybrid who despite of all kinds of turmoil’s, is able to hit a balance among diverse areas of her life. The post-colonial contemporary novelists portray a “new woman” in their fiction, the woman who belongs to modern commercial society, one who rebels against the customary social set up. Shobha De, being a post-colonial contemporary novelist

and writer of third wave of feminism, rationally projects the new image of women i.e. the aristocratic women in present-day India. These ultra modern and sophisticated women use sex as bludgeon to succeed and mould men to their point of view. This sprouting new picture of women has shaped a crisis in family and society and has dazed the nitty-gritty's of age-old traditions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, extra-marital relations or separation are no longer considered to be a taboo. The concept of idyllic Indian woman has turned out to be outdated. Contemporary woman is career-oriented because she knows that it is her financial dependence which authorizes a male to dominate his wife and subject her to physical and psychological pain.

In Shobha De's first novel, *Socialite Evenings*, she describes the journey of a prominent Mumbai socialite Karuna from a clumsy middle-class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna's life can be divided into three phases – life before marriage, married life, and life after the separation from her husband. In all these three phases of her life readers notice the rebellious instinct. In her childhood days she was the only child with a discipline problem both at home and at school. For example, she didn't like going to school by train or a double-decker bus. While other girls dressed in smart terry cot uniforms, she wore her sash hipster-style. Her sisters preferred to concentrate on their percentages whereas she preferred to discover Bombay and Bombazines. Naturally, as she grew up there developed in her the emotional urge to identify with the outside world, the modern crowd and the fascinating world of affluent girls who had everything. She was not interested in her studies and also acted as a model for an ad agency much against her father's will. It has been the desire of Karuna to get rid of her middle class background and shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle rung government official.

At this juncture Karuna meets Anjali a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Anjali is an independent lady, rich, confident and beautiful. She has everything the modern woman needed. 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 to fulfill 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 modeling and friendship with her boy friend 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. In this patriarchal society, man can only think about his life without woman but a woman cannot do the same. Some women mutely tolerate this situation and spend their whole life in suffocated atmosphere. But Shobha De's women are different as they do not meekly accept their subordinate position. In the same way Karuna also gets jaded with her husband in the bond of married life and gets divorce to fulfill her dreams of life.

The struggle of Karuna for being independent modern woman, therefore, does not remain confined only to her but becomes representative struggle of the modern women to be free and self-reliant i.e. the new woman. After her divorce, her husband meets her to express his regret and ask her to come back and live with him. 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. Karuna thinks she has become one-up and vindicated herself as a woman by abusing her husband verbally when he comes with the proposal to remarry her,

And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don't ever want to see you again. I let you in this time . . . but never again I'll call the cops if you try and invade my home in future. You are even more of a warm than I thought. You deserve Winnie – I hope she's got a wax doll of yours. I'll send her some extra pins to stick into it. Now take your frigging pipe and out!? (264).

There always been a contrast between Karuna and her mother in their attitude towards the institution of marriage. Her traditional mother advises Karuna to marry the right person. But she refuses to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore that is why she rebels against the patriarchal system. She resents, resists and rejects male dominance at every step. Her statements reflect her desire for the affirmation of



herself. She wants to destroy the gender discrimination – the real source of women's oppression and create a new society in which there will be no place for inequality between men and women. Critics opine that 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.

De presents these modern independent women having courage to revolt and refuse being puppets in the hands of men in the name of tradition and society. Shobha De's excellent and sophisticated women of the upper class family gets fascinated by the social institution of the marriage and family for the sake of money and admiration as seen in *Socialite Evenings*. As the story unfurls the life of these women, we find the sexual independence of Anjali who at last seeks comfort in religious conviction after her second marriage with Kumar, an incapable and mismatched man; the dazzling and energetic Ritu who leaves her second husband for a smuggler. Karuna's frustration with her husband cultivates her castle in the sky of an unconventional woman.

Shobha De was closely associated with the world of Mumbai Cinema. She knows well about the dark life behind the screen, with all its ugly, dirty details. Her novel *Starry Nights* explores the hardcore realities in the movie world. 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. These women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. They live for themselves, fight, and revolt and shape their destiny and self identity. Shobha De's women protagonists do not believe in suffering submissively, they use all the means to achieve joy and success in life. The women struggle hard to turn the tide in their favor. They face hardships, exploitation and defeat at different stages in their life but they are not discouraged. Instead, they continued to challenge the patriarchal society. They fight against slavery, oppression and exploitation. She rebels against the existing moral codes and social norms. She has acquired enough courage and strength to fight and challenge injustice.

Aasha Rani, the protagonist of the novel suffered in her childhood due to the lack of parental love, care, protection and an emotional security. She cannot enjoy her childhood because of her father. These results in her hate so much so that she refuses to see even her ill father. Now whenever she recalls her past, the painful and bitter memories of her lost childhood torture her mind. Naturally she hates her father which is thus revealed when Aasha Rani tells her sister Sudha about her father. Aasha Rani also vents a rebellious protest against her own overpowering selfish mother who looks at her daughter as a source of income. She bursts out: 'Money, money, money. That is all you think of. Well, I am fed up of being your money machine. I have done enough for everybody – you, Sudha and the others – Now I want to live for myself and enjoy life' (183).

Shobha De's novels do not accept meekly the marginalization of miserable, pathetic and suffering women. They asserted their individuality in many different ways. Instead of passively accepting their miserable lot, these women struggle, fight, protest and challenge the male dominance. Aasha Rani expresses her hatred for the men who exploited her. She tells Kishenbhai bitterly about her future strategy in defying men, "All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all beat you at your own game!" (13). Further, her betrayal by Akshay Arora is the most bitter and traumatic experience. As despaired by frustration, she tries to commit suicide. But in her attempt, she fortunately survives.

This voice of Aasha Rani represents the different ways of protest registered by women against their oppression and exploitation in a patriarchal social set up. Henceforth Aasha Rani, rather strong in character, takes bold decisions to survive in society. She has a composite energy of production, protection and love, both earthly and sexual. Her suffering, exploitation, humiliation, oppression and even separation from her husband, do not control her desire to live a life of her own. She breaks all sexual mores and social norms by her unusual and deviant behavior. Her sexual encounters with different men such as Kishenbhai, a small film distributor, Akshay Arora, a top film-star and true

representative of patriarchy, Sheth Amirchand, a Member of Parliament, Linda, a journalist and a lesbian, Abhijit Mehra, son of an industrialist Amrish Mehra, Jojo, a film producer and Gopalakrishnan, a Tamil businessman point out her sexual aggression. She defeats them at their own game, and demolishes the mythical image of woman imposed by the patriarchal structure. There are chiefly three women characters, Geetha Devi, Malini, Aasha. All these women resist for their immoderate dreams with all their power in male subjugated society. They hit back, rebel and contour their fate by living for themselves. They don't believe in suffering passively, they leave no stone unturned to attain the climax of joy and success. Overflowing with prospects and enthusiasm, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life.

The novel *Second Thoughts* depicts the saga of a middle class Bengali girl Maya who is trapped in arranged marriage with Ranjan Malik. It is a bitter-sweet love story of the marital life of Ranjan Malik and Maya. It is through this story of love and betrayal Shobha De exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy of Indian marriage system. Maya wants to complete her studies of textile designing but her mother, Chitra, realizes that a foreign returned boy would get "snapped before you and I can blink our eyes" (3). The Malik family appear to be modern but is too traditional in their outlook. Therefore, Maya protests, "How could they tell me not to work after marriage? Do any educated trained girls stay at home these days? I didn't like that remark" (13). Both Chitra and Mrs. Malik inculcate the set rules in the minds of Maya and Ranjan much before they get married. But it is more due to the pressure of the deep rooted tradition on one hand and exposure to the modern education and the contemporary social trends on the other, that they both find it difficult to establish harmony between them. Rajan provides Maya "nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and square meals a day" (263) Maya cannot feel a sense of belonging and consequently she feels utterly neglected and alienated since she cannot get the confidence to call the house her own.

This sense of loneliness and rejection draws her towards Nikhil Verma, a college going neighbor, who gently persuades Maya to get real and

act real. His company brings a new meaning to her life. Again her dreams and desires revive and she wants to enjoy life of Bombay. With Ranjan she was closed in the house but with Nikhil she wants to explore Bombay of her dreams. She slowly becomes bold and allows Nikhil to visit her. With the passage of time Nikhil is successful in creating a place for him in Maya's heart. As a result, Maya develops a brief but explosive and passionate friendship with Nikhil. Maya is so depressed and frustrated that soon she establishes an extra-marital relationship with him and at last breaks the long silence. Now even with a little encouragement from Nikhil, she is ready to say goodbye to her "uninspiring, life without the slightest regret" (171). When Ranjan is away on business trips, Maya feels free and wants to inhale the fresh air. Nikhil encourages her to live life as she wants and not to care for the opinions of others, "stop pretending to be someone you want the world to believe you are" (171). But though Maya takes this bold step, she feels a sense of guilt as she breaks the set norms. At this time, she learns about Nikhil's engagement with a Delhi-based girl which shatters her dream completely. On second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Mumbai, but also of her marriage.

Shobha De, thus, has become 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. Shobha De's novels deal with romantic partnerships that revolve around sexual encounters and financial gain. V. Saraladevi makes the observation that the female characters in Shobha De do not see their sexuality as a constraint but rather as a powerful weapon in the power struggle that exists inside their relationships. To them, sex is not restricted to the body; rather, it is a symbol of power that governs man woman interactions as a whole. They refuse to accept any form of misery and are willing to go to any lengths necessary in order to achieve their goals of happiness and success in life.

## Conclusion

Shobha De is dedicated to providing an open and honest account of what occurs as well as how she feels about it. There is nothing condescending or condescendingly arrogant in the way that she describes India or Indian culture; rather, she honors the genuine aspirations of Indian customs and traditions. On the other hand, there are those in India who adhere to more traditional notions of sexuality, and they despise her for being so forthright. She is gifted with intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. She views extramarital relationships as a kind of protest or resistance on the part of women when they are denied the same options in life as men, with the goal of shattering the conventional and moral standards that are held in society. From *Socialite Evenings* to *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De discusses the problems of women in patriarchal society, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship and the emergence of live-in relationship. Through her novels, she makes her readers to introspect about fast fading love, pleasure and satisfaction in marital relations.

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