



Shobha De: The Changing Image of Modern Indian Woman

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Abstract

Women are the integral part of human civilization. No country or society can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of women in society differ from culture to culture, and from age to age, yet one fact is common to almost all the societies, that women have never been equal to man, they are suppressed, oppressed and subjected by men. But the Modern Indian Woman is in fact a many splendored creature, more educated and aware than her predecessor, although very large segments of the modern Indian woman seems to be losing out on the massive store we have as heritage. This paper explores the rapid evolution of the Modern Indian Woman, defined as an urban, educated, middle classed Indian woman, whose development has paralleled the equally rapid growth of the middle classes in India. Today the position of women in society has changed radically because of "Feminist Movement". Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Indian women writers, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharti Mukharjee, Anita Desai and Shobha De have taken up issues related to the status of women in India. Discrimination against woman must stop, they plead. According to them, the contemporary woman does not want to conform to the traditional image anymore. She wants her due, her rightful place alongside her male counterpart in Indian society.

Keywords: *Civilization, suppressed, oppressed, subjected, predecessor, feminism, discrimination, contemporary and counterpart.*

Introduction

"Women writers have been enthusiastically engaged in bringing about radical social change and demanding recognition of the woman's position and potentiality in the development of the human society."

(L.Sonia Nigthoujam)

In the 21st century women's liberation is gathering momentum. Women are becoming conscious of their work and identity in the society. Indian writing in English has carved an identity of its own in the Literary Diaspora. Indian writers in English have successfully captured in their writings in India that is fraught with myriad problems and idiosyncrasies. The difference between man and woman, and the resultant discrimination which woman suffers, feminists argue, are social and



artificially contrived. Therefore, feminism as a social movement sought to redress this imbalance in society by providing women take their rightful place in this world. Shobha De, a modern Indian novelist, who burst on the Indian literary panorama with her novels that has held a mirror to the female psyche and has brought forth the full range of female experience. Her descriptive style of writing has helped her to depict the lifestyles of the Indian elite and urban middle classes who are her chosen subjects and also voice her concerns about the age-old imbalance existing in the phalli-centric Indian society. To quote her: *I did write with a great deal of empathy toward women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the women's situation.*

Women in India have been marginalized and exploited, their marginality being primarily physical, social and economic. They are still exploited and treated as inferior beings in this ancient land of dreams and nightmares. Women in India are conditioned to be passive receptacle to male virility and potency. Simone De Beauvoir's remarks are worth quoting in this context:

'She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other.'

Their bodies become a site for demonstrating male sexual power, gender inferiority as well as ethnic superiority. Mary. E. John and Janaki Nayar have aptly observed:

'Women have been the victims of

patriarchal sexual practices whether through the exploitation of the landlords, during caste atrocities, in marital rape, in state policies, concerning reproduction or as bearers of violent marks'.

Shobha De, in her characteristic manner vividly depicts various feminine issues, marital dissonance, and the changing moral values of Indian people, the sinister side of power, money, glory and fame. She unabashedly portrays ennui of modern women resulting from male egoism which forces them to cater to male sexual demands. Women are treated as nothing more than 'flesh' that can be traded among men for exploitation. Shobha De has debunked the traditional image of Indian women and created the 'new women' who do not shy from demanding recognition from the society. Her new women are not door-mats; they are aggressive and are adept in using men to their advantage, for them marriage is not an end to all means but serves as a means to attain their desires. Her skillfully created array of modern women is bold and more vital than the male characters that adhere to the patriarchal paradigms. These captivating women are independent, intelligent, in control of their lives and do not hesitate to indulge in sex on their own terms.

Shobha De, through her writings has tried to arouse the society from its century's old slumber and set into motion steps needed to emancipate Indian women from violence and oppression in all its manifestations. Her female characters embody rebels who refuse to be a slave to oppressive societal norms. De creates settings in which characters have to combat social



oppressive forces that negate and undermine individual power and free will. An interesting facet that has been highlighted by Pushpinder Syal is that Shobha De's novels have titles beginning with S as does her first name. Certainly it's not a coincidence. According to Pushpinder Syal:

"S is for senses and sex and self. And these, it seems, are the chief concerns of Shobha De's writings."

Shobha De, in her first novel '**Socialite Evenings**', has presented her protagonist, Karuna, as multi-faceted persona. She is representative of the urban middle-class married woman who aspires to be part of Mumbai high-society. She deftly manipulates every opportunity to realize her dreams. She is a non-conformist and doesn't bother much about the traditional concepts of morality. Her chance meeting with Anjali brings a turning point in her life. Karuna learns to manipulate men and puts at stake her loveless marriage to actualize her ambitions. She refuses to abide by any of the traditional social norms of evolving as a virtuous woman. Towards the end, she breaks free from the shackles of marriage and liberates herself from all obligations to that she could return to her old parents and take care of them. Thus, Karuna reiterates towards the end:

"I feel confident now that I can look myself. I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head..... I am at peace with myself."

Karuna traverses from the contemporary wasteland towards self-affirmation. As a confident modern Indian woman she rises like a phoenix with a new identity, a transformed

image and perception of life.

In her second novel, '**Starry Nights**', Shobha De weaves different stories of adolescence and adulthood that revolve around the life of the protagonist Asha Rani. Asha Rani is forced by her greedy mother to enact in pornographic movies, her initiation in to the world of sexual exploitation is brought about by her parents, her uncle, her lesbian journalist friend Linda, a much married man Akshay Arora. Asha fails to receive any positive reinforcement at home. Her fate and her sexuality are determined by the people around her. She manages to have innumerable bed partners but no partner in a platonic sense who would understand her feelings and desires. Asha marries a New Zealander and shifts her base from India at the peak of her acting career. Asha Rani's search for solace in the form of her daughter Sasha also proves futile as Sasha rebuffs her own Indian origin. She realizes late that her choices have been formed by those around her rather than by her actions and that contributed to her moral degeneration and physical disintegration.

Shobha De's novel '**Sisters**' is an emotional saga of two sisters, Mallika and Alisha. Mallika or Mikki the legitimate daughter of Hira Lal returns to India after her parents' death to take charge of her father's business and property and also to dig deeper into the causes behind her father's murder. Mallika does try to bridge the gap with her step-sister Alisha. Alisha however detests Mallika and rebuffs all her attempts towards establishing a semblance of normalcy to their relationship. Mallika being a



liberated woman gets into a planned wedlock with business tycoon Binny Malhotra. Alisha in order to vent her wrath on her step-sister deliberately moves intimately with those men who are rejected by Mikki. Millika and Alisha decide to flee to London eventually to escape from the sharks of the business world. De presents both the sisters as sexually liberated modern women who do not shy from accepting their need for sexual fulfillment.

In the novel, '**Strange Obsession**' Amrita Aggarwal, a young super model, arrives in Mumbai and attracts the attention of a mysterious homosexual woman Minx or Meenakshi. Minx is strangely obsessed with Amrita and guards her like a jealous lover. Amrita is catapulted by the events in her life which sucks her in a complex vortex without her making any conscious choices. Minx's obsession turns to mania and she does not hesitate to kill a rival model Lola. Minx says:

"What more do I have to do to prove myself? Kill? I will do that too. Just tell me..... Who? You want me to kill someone? Any one. I'll do it." (p.62)

Amrita withdraws from this relationship only when Rakesh comes into her life which leads to Minx humiliating both of them.

In Shobha De's '**Snapshots**' the story starts with a reunion of six women who were friends during their school days. These women are products of post-colonial cultures and are conscious that their power lies in their sexuality. The novel presents snapshots of the lives of these six women- Swati, Aparna, Reema,

Rashmi, Surekha and Noor. These modern women do not view marriage as a sacred tie and consider it a necessary transaction to fulfill their need for money, physical desire and position in the society. De, rips open the shrouds of high-class Indian society where infidelity, incest, sex, rape, deceit have become a reality.

Nisha, the narrator in De's '**Sultry Days**', loves Deb, a man of loose morals. His sole interest in life is to attain power and money which is in direct contrast to Nisha's attempts to achieve fame through sweat and toil. Nisha is attracted to Deb as he is a mixture of opposites. Deb joins the underworld of Yashwantbhai which sows seeds of discord between him and Nisha. She exposes the criminal world of Yashwantbhai with the help of her social activist mother Pratimaben. Nisha emerges from this fiasco as an independent and strong willed woman. She starts identifying with the problems and daily chores of middle class and works for the welfare of the underdogs of the society.

In Shobha De's '**Second Thoughts**' Maya, a young middle-class Bengali bride, reaches Mumbai after marriage with the ubiquitous dream of being an ideal wife to her husband Ranjan. To her dismay she discovers that Ranjan is completely indifferent to her emotional overtures and adheres to the patriarchal notion that women should not step out of household. He says:

"I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman's duty to run a good home". (p.11)

Maya is completely disillusioned



and feels entrapped in a love-less marriage. She grows resentful of the restricted domestic life and soon finds a stimulating company in her neighbor Nikhil who enlivens her sagging spirit and their sexual union helps Maya to discover love and passion. It is through her physical desire for Nikhil that she starts identifying herself. Maya by committing adultery attains power for herself as a woman. When she is informed about Nikhil's engagement with a young unmarried girl, she is forced to return to her dull and dreary world of her arranged marriage. She learns to survive the sultriness of Mumbai and her marriage. At last, Maya realizes that she cannot be completely free and she cannot opt out of her imperfect marriage. She is aware that according to Hindu Dharmashastras and Manusmriti women are not fit for independence and must worship their husbands as gods and should learn to treat their marital union as sacred. Shobha De's portrayal of modern Indian women characters in her novels is quite different from the tenets prescribed by sacred texts. She unabashedly writes about the deviousness of women as well as the vulnerability of women. A close study of her oeuvre reveals that her women protagonists are products of ultra modern era who seek to realize their individual worth and do not shy from defying the ancient traditions of Hindu society. Her women characters and their experiences despite their varied names appear to be more human due to fallibility.

In Shobha De's novels sexual union and satisfaction is the bedrock of all relationship. The women in her novels willingly uphold the responsibility

of their own sustenance and seek their own salvation. De, deftly puts the concurrent motifs of love, passion, sexual pleasure, detachment, deceit, humiliation and exploitation for open analysis and seems to suggest that women have also the right to seek satisfaction within marriage or without and that is the greatest truth of human life.

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