

**The Theme of Feminism in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights***

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**Abstract**

Feminism in the Indian context is a by-product of the western liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional right of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. The Indian woman is caught in the flux of tradition and modernity; but both cast off her aspiration. In literary terms, it precipitates in a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. In critical practice, it boils down to empathetically the plight of women characters at the receiving end of human interaction. Shobha De has challenged the male culture that prevails in our country. But the early soft voice of protest of her predecessors gradually turned into an explicit annoyance and finally took the shape of an open rebellion.

**Key Words:** Feminism, literature, quest, voice, women

**Introduction**

R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand are the early Indian writers in English, who are preoccupied with feminist concerns especially related with women belonging to middle or lower middle class, their attempt to liberate themselves from the restrictions imposed by the system made by man and the subsequent problems a woman has to face in the Indian cultural context. Most of the novels of R.K. Narayan are concerned with the quest for female identity in men-women relationship. R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) are concerned with the quest for female identity. His novel, *The Dark Room* has been called by Narayan himself as an early testament of the women's liberation movement. In the words of

Nova Kapadia, *The Dark Room* can be cited as the only novel of Narayan in which woman is questioning, however mildly, her traditional role and he calls this novel a lament on the disharmony of domestic life. The novel, *The Old Woman and Cow* (1960), is Anand's only novel in which a woman is the central character. In this novel, Mulk Raj Anand represents a modern Sita in the person of Gauri who defies her husband and chooses to lead a single life. It is a new perspective in the portrayal of women in fiction in Indian literature. Nayantara Sahgal's concept of a free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional altitude. The need for freedom for woman, according to her, doesn't merely mean the defiance of old-established convention, it must also make her aware of herself as an individual and refuse to tolerate injustice. The female characters Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit of

*This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971) are wives of the social high-ups, hyper-sensitive, yearning for individual freedom. Shobha De is one of the feminist writers of today. Her writings gained popularity for their inclination towards the fair sex and the graphic depiction of their pursuits and attitudes. Her works raise a protest against the male dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom to act according to their will and continue to cherish their own dreams. Women are treated as subaltern and mere man's shadow. They are considered the otherness of man and not an equal of man or an individual. However, the role of woman in society has been changing with each decade of a century, always with a good deal of social conflict and ideological struggle. These have left a great influence on sexual and social codes of the prevalent society which in turn is well embodied by Shobha De in her characters.

### **Discussion**

Shobha De raises her voice against the malecentric culture and strongly attacks against the marginalization of woman. In her novels, she presumably mirrors her own feminist mind set. She strives to undo the distorted image of woman who cries for freedom and equality but whose cry still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. From this prospective, the woman in her works are more powerful than man. Women are presented as sexually liberated and free thinking in her novels. But even more remarkable is the strength of her characters in the very culture that has judged her. Her female characters, especially only after they have gone through their own experiences, come to their real self.

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* (1989) shows the struggle of woman against the predatory male dominated society. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* is a problem child both at home and at school. She declines to dog the traditional path of etiquette and manners. At home, she refuses to cower before elders and at school, she wore her sash hipster style. Throughout the novel Karuna figures as a woman who asserts her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. She figures as a woman, not a victim. Shobha De deals with the sullenly skewed power equation between the genders and its transformation into the stuff of art. Karuna with all her attempts at ego -assertion, refuses subscription to stereotypes to succumb to the hegemony of the gender biased culture.

In *Socialite Evenings*, Shobha De articulates her own inclination towards vamp art and displays the train of female characters symbolizing absolute freedom of womankind from all forms of patriarchal inhibition. A housewife, Karuna encapsulated the plight of the India woman: "I felt like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motions of housekeeping and playing wife but the resentment and rebellion remained just under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation". (*Socialite Evenings*: 69)

Shobha's women are liberated individuals in search of a niche in their lives through escapades. Karuna detests her husband's flattering nature, his duplicity and deviousness. He who had earlier rebuked and reproached her for having an illegal child is now satisfying her female ego by sly and base flattery, by saying that it was their legitimate child. But this is wrongly timed and too late for Karuna, for she has

already undergone the protracted pangs of an abortion. Hence her demolition of the male ego: “.....you are even more of a worm 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. (Socialite Evenings: 264)

Karuna is a different Bombay socialite, unlike other, she defies the preconceptions and presumptions of a phallogocentric society, a world poles apart from her own rationale of life. Other women hardly defy the norms of the androcentric world. Anjali for instance has her own hangover following her separation from Abe. Shobha’s women like Anjali and Karuna project their passions onto others as a female power play in order to deconstruct the male ego. Taking up a non-conformist stance, she adopts a radical feminist point of view all agog to destroy the sex or gender system – the real source of women’s oppression – and to create a new society in which men and women are equal at every level of existence. In order to avoid sexual exploitation or eroticisation of woman as mere sex objects, Millett advocates a society having a single standard of “sex freedom” for boys and girls without which the equality between man and woman will be ephemeral. Shobha De has fully exposed the feminine world of the characters for her humanness should be identified with ‘femininity’ because as Marilyn French observes: “A masculine world is less fully human than a feminine one”. With dissident woman like Karuna and Anjali oppressive gender roles will be deconstructed and woman will take up a revolutionary role, flouting androgyny. A new generation of “wild”, “lusty” and “wandering” woman like those of Shobha’s female protagonists will be

created who would prefer to identify themselves as radical lesbian feminist separatists. Pornography in Shobha’s novel becomes a symptom and symbol of the female’s defiance of a male-regulated female sexuality. Shobha’s women suffer in androgynous world for they do not cherish genuine passions but only plastic passions which make them passive without a sense of purposeful living in a frustrating world of anxiety, guilt, hostility, bitterness, boredom and resentment. These women cast off the conventional sense of morality, the old tired and repressive sexual moves and revel in the erotic celebration of the body.

De’s second novel, *Starry Nights* (1990) indicates the arrival of Indian woman in society with a rebellious defiance against the well- entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social order. Aasha Rani, the highly seductive star of the tinsel world of Bollywood and the heroine of the novel displays disarming nonchalance in her torrid sexual affairs with men of all hues and variety. Once trapped in the mire of lust and vaulting ambition, she knows no turning back, till the end of the novel. Shobha De makes Aasha Rani’s peculiar circumstances responsible for her being launched into a world of abominable lust and greed. Her father led a dissipated life abandoning her mother and marrying a dancer. Her mother had to do dirty things in order to support her family and lived with her daughters in the slums. Aasha Rani first surrenders to Kishambhai, with her satanic seductiveness and boundless libidinal energy. Aasha Rani breaks all sexual taboos with gusto. Once the repressed in her is aroused, it becomes a colossus mauling up the flotsam and jetsam of the patriarchal order. Once, she

becomes a famous film star she, with an unfeminine vehemence, becomes a liberated woman who lives for her own pleasure and no value system. Sexual encounters and compromises are a routine affair in her life. She feels so infatuated for Akshay, the reigning star of the film world. Knowing well that the love world always remains unfulfilled because the lover is a married man, she continues her affair for she so desperately loves him that she can't help. She is so much in love with Akshay that she suggests religious conversion, for Islam permits polygamy. But Akshay does not accept this idea. She can have closer relationship with Akshay but she can't marry him. But after a period of convalescence, she rises like a phoenix to be an emancipated woman again. An incomplete childhood with a single parent, poverty, starvation, her mother's cruel dream to make her, a film star, the devilish attitude of the people of the stardom to bruise and batter her femininity, the jealousy and unkindness of her sister Sudha, the collapse of her marital life and separation from her own child — she stoically endures a series of shocks one after another. Aasha Rani's attempt to become a wife and mother also failed. Her marriage with Jay in New Zealand also turns out to be a failure since their marriage was a compromise. When Jay drifts away from her, Aasha Rani does not curse him, nor does she use any abusive language, but she simply walks out of his life in a polite manner. She tries to revive her father's studios and also dreams of making her daughter the future 'golden girl' on the silver screen.

Shobha De's brand of feminism admits of no redemptive formula for the 'fallen woman' and no millennium, for the liberated women. Her women characters who endeavour to liberate themselves often meet with disaster. Before this happens, they send a whole host of taboos devised by patriarchal order. This is how we should appreciate the crusaders of a different kind like Anjali and Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* and Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*.

### **Conclusion**

Shobha De is essentially a feminist writer like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande. She concentrates on women's problems and gives new approach to them. She is an Indian modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. Thematically, Shobha De's novels are highly compelling. They offer sufficient stuff to the critics to interpret them in varied ways. Shobha De gives vivid picture of the society and culture of the high society of contemporary India. Eminent Italian scholar Alessandro Monti evaluates the fiction of Shobha De in terms of 'the making of modern India'. Shobha De raises boldly her voice against the injustice done by men to womenfolk in her novels, *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights* and fights back for social equilibrium which is a crystal clear picture of her feminine sensibility.

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