

Urban Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Shobha De

Dr. Sonal R Mehetta

Assistant Professor, HSNC University, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Abstract

Shobha De is a name bringing a lot of awareness about women, particularly urban- their rights and their sensibilities. These women break all the shackles of the traditional patriarchal society. Women are for hearth is not their formula. They are looking out for freedom. They want to explore life may it be breaking the taboo of having multiple partners or lesbianism; working and becoming financially independent, or asking for separation or divorce. They dream and dare. She is the New Woman.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Marginalization, Emancipation, Sex, Urban, Illicit Relationship, Ambitious, Equality

Urban female sensibility is the prime mover behind the novels of Shobha De without exception. There is not a single novel that does not include the theme of women's sensibility in the urban background. Sensibility is something that a woman exhibits in her character. The present paper proposes to examine the element of sensibility in all its ramifications in the novels of Shobha De. Sensibility in her novels is quite a frequently used term which may be referred to as sensitivity. An urban woman's sensibility is tested by De on various fronts in the improvised situations imaginatively created by her.

As against the traditional woman brought up under inexorable subjugation, an urban woman is sensitive to her husband's infidelity; as against the dominance of the husband, she shows sensibility against him boldly; as against the house-bred concept of a housewife, she insists on playing the role of a working woman fearlessly; as against playing the role of a submissive woman, she refuses to be suppressed brutally, and to use her talents to the upliftment of the family; as

against the traditional role of a woman to stay in-doors, she over-rides her sensibility to the edge of hob-nobbing with the people; as against the husbands basking she is bold enough to cry for separation or divorce.

Shobha De recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She is the champion of a new woman and recklessly overthrows traditionally established institutions such as marriage. De is an extremely talented writer and dazzles the readers with her frank and candid tales of human relationships. De evinces daredevil courage in writing freely about sex, the new woman in society. If the men have a wild sex life, the women in De's novels need to be no less wild or less sexy. The social system based on male domination is seriously threatened and called into question. Women of the Oriental tradition are in general adjustable, accommodative, pliable and service-minded. Indian women are seen to be suffering the age-old subjugation and humiliation.

In championing the rights of an urban sensible woman De does not care even for traditional morality. She writes freely using sexually explicit words without any fear of disapproval from the average reading public. She is full of titillating details and presents a total new concept of morality. Her novels contain the most alluring studies of the high life. No doubt she has been a controversial writer throughout because her novels contain explicit sex scenes. It is through these reckless sexual escapades that she projects the world of the urban woman. Maya's affair with Nikhil is a telling instance in her novel *Second Thoughts*.

Shobha De's presentation of sex in her novels is very liberal and convincing, serving as an eye opener to the conservative Indian masters. These specimens of the new women are all violators of the age-old concept of traditional Indian values and morals. They have no hassles in breaking the time-honored law. Look at the paradoxical statement of Swati in *Snapshots* "We rejoice in our sexuality. We don't suppress it. We don't dismiss it. We don't find it dirty. Sex doesn't threaten us. I am not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality and chastity. It's pathetic." (977 Shobha De Omnibus)

The meek woman would forever live in the shadow of man bearing all the atrocities of the male-dominated society, while the modern woman is a rebel unprepared to be second to man. The new woman in fact is an enigma as termed by L. Sonia Ningthoujam. These women may be called immoral by the conventional standards of society but to them, it is not a matter of shame or disdain. This new morality is therefore a

characteristic feature of the new women's life.

This show of sensitivity is an exclusive part of a new woman. She does not consider it her responsibility to stick around home, taking care of the husband's needs and looking after the kids. Nisha in *Sultry Days* is an example to corroborate our opinion.

Shobha De repeatedly harps on sex as a bilateral affair based on mutual need and mutual dependency. Swati in the *Snapshots* stresses, "Sex is not filthy...our minds make it so. Look at Khajuraho Konark..." (979) De demonstrates a mature attitude towards sex. The novelist has created this new woman who need not be underestimated, who is here to stay.

As it has been stressed above Shobha De deals with the sexual revolt on the part of newly-armed sensible woman in all its ramifications. Shobha De's treatment of this theme is nothing sort of shocking. In *Starry Nights*, almost every conceivable and non-conceivable form of sexual behavior is presented. Besides heterosexual behavior, she has presented the most awesome and intriguing sexual relationship that is the woman to woman relationship or lesbianism. The protagonist of *Starry Nights*, Asha Rani shares a passionate relationship with her journalist friend Linda. Again, in De's *Strange Obsession*, the entire story revolves around lesbianism with the two leading characters that is Amrita and Minx sharing this highly resentful relationship. Minx becomes a crazy obsessed lover of Amrita. It may be said that lesbianism is a natural consequence of aspiring for greater independence in a woman's psyche. It is easier for a woman to surrender herself to a woman. There is no struggle, no victory, no

defeat. In exact reciprocity each is at once a subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality.

Lesbianism underlines tenderness. A tender approach is an important thing in a man-woman relationship and particularly in man's behavior towards woman. A woman can work up another woman better than a man. In fact there are several psycho-physical reasons for a woman's lesbian preference. At first, Amrita was resistant and reluctant to Minx's overtures, but ultimately gives in deriving pleasure there from. Lesbianism leads to realizing independence from the male which is another important principle of feminism or women's Lib movement. Hence the presence of lesbianism in Shobha De's novels is a part of the new rebellious urban women who wants an equal footing with men. De's depiction of explicit sex between women is a truthful picture of the new reality which is coming up fast in the modern world. De has brought an admirably realistic account of the women's Lib today in her novels. This is a valuable eye opener to the minds which tend to shut off so many serious realities in the name of obscenity and taboo. If these realities are given due significance in liberal and constructive way a lot of human reform is possible. De indeed has left no facts untouched in her presentation of the image of the new urban women.

When we talk about Shobha De's handling of urban women, here is a rider. She only cares for the upper-class women. No characters from any lower-class society have been picked up. De presents a group of modern, vain upper-class women with all their faults, for example, Karen, Shona and Feroze. Through these women characters De

sheds significant light on the important issues which give morals of these women a new face.

De's novels appeal so much to the middle-class readership for it is the middle-class women who are always eager to read and know about the lifestyle of the upper class women. The Indian upper-class society and its women are fully laid bare in De's novels. All the aspects of this society are dealt with the fascinating as well as the abhorrent ones. *Second Thoughts* is the only novel which sketches the life of the higher middle class and in the character of Maya presents woman who apparently conforms to the norms of the society but secretly breaks them when she finds them unjust and unacceptable. All said and done De realistically portrays Indian high society in almost all her novels. Herself being a part of that society, she dares to portray the seamy side of both the traditional and the modern ways of living of the new urban women. She gives a very clear picture of the new women who resides in the world of this aristocratic circle.

A note on feminism in Shobha De won't be out of place here. Shobha De is a modern voice and champions women's freedom and liberation. Basically, in the traditional orthodox society, women are treated inferior to men physically, politically, economically and socially. This feminist perspective has gained prominence at the hands of such writers as Shobha De, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande. In fact, of these days of free thinking, women cannot be victimized. A new class of women has come up which is ready to take on the world to promote the women's perspective. Shobha De, who is

quite unconventional and unorthodox in the presentation of female behavior in her novels is supposed to be the real spokesmen of women's struggle for liberty, equality and consolidation of women power in the society.

Shobha De differs from almost all the writers in her stands towards females and showcases a feminine sensibility. Her women are women of strong likes and dislikes. Her women are not sati Savitri like. They do not believe in the philosophy of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The above quoted writers have created such women characters that are not ready to immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands; rather they are ready to fight for a prestigious living. Shobha De is among the first to explore the world of urban woman in India.

The case of Indian sensible women cannot be considered justly without taking into account her economic position. Eventually everything boils down to money which is the great leveler. There can be no talk of independence without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit so long as the body and the soul are being kept together by somebody else.

Man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish qualification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort but never has he desired to elevate her. Shobha De has attracted the charge of pornography through her female characters. This becomes a symptom and symbol of the female's defiance of a male-regulated female sexuality.

Shobha De's defense of a modern urban woman is centered on her depiction of physical freedom, sexuality and stamina in which traditional domestic values have collapsed. In her novels the world is out of sexual order. She has tried to highlight discord in marital relationships. It is usually painful and destructive for them to be together. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. Karuna is such a woman from Socialite Evenings who declines to follow the traditional path.

Shobha De's novels are a slice of urban life. In her novels she realistically presents an intimate side of urban woman's life and also reveals her plight in the present day society. It is a fact that woman is victimized and subjugated by the male community everywhere. She has been the subordinate sex and has to conform to male standards. In most of her novels, Shobha De has focused on marginalization of women in Indian society. She draws our attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification. The women are treated with double standard. Subjugation and marginalization are the vital factors in their lives. They are never regarded as autonomous beings. But De's women do not want to depend on man for each and everything. The oppression of women is oft repeated refrain of Shobha De's novels. This is caused and brought about in her fiction by a number of prominent forces namely mans' pride, incompatible marriages, traditional norms of behavior and patriarchal social system. De is a post independent novelist. Her treatment is characterized by the reversal of gender roles that is her fictional world is dominated by the female characters whereas the male

characters are exploited and used. It is the woman who holds all the trump cards. She is a clever manipulator and a great strategist. This is the new Indian urban women who can defeat or outplay her male counterparts.

In conclusion it may be noted that De has been able to project a realistic image of the new woman with her new sensibility and urban background and that her presentation is immensely thought provoking in giving a

positive moral message to our conservative patriarchal society. The moral message is that the age -old process of suppression of women cannot be held valid. On the contrary “An unsympathetic attitude toward women could inspire more evils in society and make them revolt at their inhuman treatment by making them like sacrificial animals at the altar of man’s lust for power and sex.” (130 *Image of a New Woman*, L. Sonia Ningthoujam)

References:

- Freidan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton, New York: London, 1963.
- Ningthoujam L. Sonia- *Image of a New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De*. New Delhi: Prestige. 2006.
- De, Shobha, *Starry Nights*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.
- . *Socialite Evenings*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.
- . *Strange Obsession*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1995.
- . *Sultry Days*- New Delhi: Penguin, 1994
- . *Snapshots*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1994
- . *Sisters*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.
- . *Second Thoughts*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.
- De, Shobha, and Khushwant Singh. *Uncertain Liasons: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India*. New Delhi: Viking/ Penguin India. 1993.