

Metamorphosis of Woman in the Fiction of Shobha De

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Even in the 21st century the position of women is very shocking and pathetic. Though they are holding the highest positions in the country and breaking the glass ceiling, yet discrimination, violence and social injustice continues against them. Whether they are rural or urban, belong to elite families or normal families, are the victim of social injustice. They are exploited to the extent that they are denied the right to choose their career and spouse and to make other important decisions of their life. Despite the laws of having share in property they are deprived of it.

The status of women is improving with the passage of time. There is awareness among them for their rights and duties. Union General Secretary Antonio Guterres has said that the 21st century must be the century of women's equality.

Many Indian women novelists have dealt with women's issues in their novels and have created different types of images of Indian woman. Women writers like Amrita Pritam, Kamla Das, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and NayantaraSahgal have written on the Indian woman from a woman's perspective. They have painted the Indian woman in different shades and have presented a frank and vivid account of modern and traditional woman.

Shobha De has emerged as one of the most popular women writers in Indian English fiction. Her fiction deals with major issues like displacement and marginalization of women, patriarchal hegemony and male domination. She has created a huge space for women in her fiction. She explores the world of modern urban women of India. This new woman is bold, ambitious, unconventional, tremendously energetic and frank. De says, "*I did write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation.*"(Dodiya Fiction 15). She also says that women in my books are definitely not doormats and are not willing to be kicked around.

Shobha De is a powerful author who writes from a definite feminine perspective. Her women characters

revolt against the traditional image of Indian women. De's women are new women who want to lead their life on their own terms. These women love liberty and are fearless. De's women do not care for traditional values as traditional women mostly suffered seriously. They recognise their identity and existence and refuse to suffer. They wish to explore a new world through education and employment.

A deeper study of De's novels like *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Night*, *Sisters*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sultry Days* and *Second Thoughts* etc. explore the world of new women in India, these women do not accept to be placed next to men and seek for equal rights and participation.

ShobhaDe's debut novel *Socialite Evenings* created ripples in society with its appearance in 1989. It laid bare the world of high society India. In *Socialite Evenings* the females are victims of patriarchal setup and are in search for identity and selfhood. Karuna, a prominent Bombay socialite is the protagonist of the novel. She sheds her middle-class past to establish her place in high society. Since her childhood she was the victim of patriarchal hegemony. This novel reveals Bombay high society and the lives of bored, rich housewives who are trapped in loveless marriages and are involved in extra-marital affairs. They try to seek the meaning of life in fashionable parties, westernized lifestyle and materialism etc. Karuna's divorce and other affairs have left her shattered and in order to escape these unpleasant memories she starts writing her memoirs. Her memoirs are successful, and she achieves great fame and becomes an active socialite. She asserts her selfhood and lives life on her own terms.

Anjali, Karuna's friend also asserts her selfhood and wants to get out of her middle-class background. She joins Air India as a hostess and marries Abbas Tayabji but soon feels frustrated and suffocated in this relationship. After her divorce from Tayabji, she is involved in many affairs but soon is disenchanted and disillusioned and resorts to spiritualism for peace in

life. Ritu is a gorgeous and vivacious character. Frustrated in her marriage and affairs she makes an attempt of suicide. After self-realization she returns to nature.

All these female characters are modern educated women with free will. The novelist discusses the familial and marital relations through the lives of these female characters. They find themselves trapped in loveless marriages and try to break these shackles. Their life is a journey in quest for identity and selfhood. They rebel against the male-dominated society and refuse to accept mail-assigned roles and identities. The novel also presents a host of male characters and reveals how they treat women. The novel explores the inner world of women. When Girish Shridhar, a famous filmmaker proposes Karuna, her answer reveals her inner world:

I feel all closed up and insulated. I need little time. I am discovering myself. I enjoyed this little patch of independence. I am reconnecting with my parents—they need me. I am enjoying their presence.....don't rush me please. (Socialite 60).

The new woman of Shobha De makes an effort to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raise voice against unjust treatment from the hands of man. The novel *Second Thoughts* unravels the psyche of an Indian married woman. The plot revolves around the life of Maya, a young and charming newlywed girl. To escape her dull, middle-class life in Calcutta, she marries Ranjan and dreams to have an exciting life in Bombay. Maya has the intention to be an ideal wife but soon she feels herself suffocated in her married life. Her husband Ranjan has a degree from America and has a wealthy family background, but he is completely indifferent to her desires and sentiments. Maya is a traditional girl of the 20th century and does not want to tolerate unjust treatment passively. She revolts against her husband and gives a second thought to Nikhil, who understands her at emotional level. The novelist tries to project a change that has taken place in modern Indian society. The men are not willing to accept this changed power equation. De writes:

Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level.....control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone. It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power..... it is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two

opposing forces that can lead to creative and dynamic harmony. Men will have to come to terms with women. (Shooting 111-13).

Maya feels trapped in matrimony and makes a quest for identity. At the time of marriage, she longed for the glamour of Bombay and a life of liberty. But soon her dreams are shattered, and she faces harsh realities of life. The life of Bombay does not add any glamour to her life but only deceit and desperation. Ranjan's mother Mrs. Malik does not like working women and both of them believe that a woman's duty is to manage home. Even Maya's uncle says, "*in any Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows.*" (Second 11)

The relationship of Maya and Ranjan has no substance. They live under the same roof as flat mates, there is no warmth in their relationship, "*it was a gesture devoid of any passion. An impersonal friendly sort of gesture always left me feeling like a well-trained dog being rewarded for his good behaviour.*" (Second 251).

Because of an indifferent attitude of Ranjan, Maya feels isolated and depressed. She has nobody to share her feelings and miseries with. She complains: "*Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belong to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own.*" (Second 266-67)

This sense of loneliness and rejection draws her towards Nikhil Verma, a college going neighbour. 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. When Ranjan is away on business trips, Maya feels free and wants to inhale the fresh air. In *Women Writers in the Twentieth Century Literature* Monika Gupta writes that the experience of the literary writers world over has focused around women particularly the issues of identity, alienation, suppression and protest attached to her lot.

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.*" (Second 171). But soon Nikhil proves to be a typical man who does not hesitate to take one-night stands with a desperate married woman but wants to marry

with the consent of parents. Maya's dream-world is shattered again and she says, "*I knew I would have to make it again from scratch.*" (Second 289).

In *Second Thoughts* Shobha De has presented the tension arising in the life of a married couple because their conservative and open ideas create the clash in their life. The new woman in the *Second Thoughts* is capable of taking bold decisions and establish her own identity.

In the novel *Sultry Days* Shobha De depicts the emergence of new women who are ambitious, talented and want to live an autonomous life. They revolt against the established social order and try to make a foray into all walks of life and all the more they want to have their own economic status. The novelist realistically presents the lives of young and ambitious ladies in *Sultry Days*. In this novel Shobha De chooses a man as the central character. The narrator or the protagonist is however a woman, Nisha. Through Deb alias God Nisha discovers herself. Nisha is a young and bright student and belongs to an upper middle family. Her parents have a troubled relationship. Deb is a communist and his unusual personality attracts Nisha. He knows many languages such as German, French and Spanish. He makes his entry into the literary circle through proof-reading, but soon he is associated with Art Magazine *Plume* and his career takes a turn. Now his attitude towards life starts changing and he is drawn more and more towards money and power. Nisha took up the advertising field. Deb is not emotionally attached to Nisha and is only interested in her money. She disapproves God's new style of living and their relationship starts losing its warmth. He proved to be a typical man belonging to a male-dominated society. In quest of money and power he developed liaison with Yashwantbhai, an underworld don, but Deb is killed by him as he knows much about his activities. Nisha exposes Yashwantbhai in her write-ups and is supported by her mother and a social activist Pratimaben.

In this novel Shobha De registers female's protest against the social setup which circumscribes the role of woman only to the boundary wall of her house. She also exposes the couples who pretend to live a happy life. They have extra marital relationships yet host an anniversary party for their friends. Nisha's father was a dominant man and did not give any freedom to his wife. He did not like the idea of women working to

earn money. Nisha's mother suffered a lot for many years but one day she gathered courage to revolt: *I am sick of living this false life....well it's my turn now. And you can listen to me for a change.....whether you like it or not, henceforth I will make the decisions about my life. And the first thing is that I am taking a job.* (Sultry 148).

In this novel De presents a host of modern upper-class women who are keen to break the clutches of harsh domestic life and are not ready to accept their traditional roles in male-dominated society. These new age females are hardcore rebels. Sujata, a member of God's poetry recitation group, vehemently raises her voice for liberty. She tells her family:

My duties are over....I have played the roles I was expected to at the appropriate times. Now....I am on my own....This is my life. I want to live it my way. (Sultry 31).

Many women in *Sultry Days* are career conscious and are professionals in the corporate world. They do not want to be mere housekeepers. Manju and Vimla are examples of new age females. Shobha De writes:

Workaholism for women has become very fashionable. If men can pursue careers ruthlessly, so can we, women declared at seminars and workshops for senior managers.... Postpone babies or ask your husband to share housework. (Sultry 119).

These new women have a new outlook towards family and social status. These women want to have complete control over their lives. They reject the idea of giving the reins of their lives in the hands of any other person. Feroze and Kiki are also new women. De writes:

Feroze was on her own in more ways than one. Enterprising, manipulative and full of strange kind of charm.... Feroze became a familiar and popular figure in filmdom....She drove her own car, she smoked foreign cigarettes. She traveled by planes. (Sultry 150).

Pramila, a talented poet leaves her family and moves to Bombay to pursue her career as a poet and soon becomes very famous. Nisha is concerned about the uneducated simple women of Bombay who do not have any idea of women liberation movement, democracy and their rights etc.

Though the new women portrayed in the fiction of Shobha De may not seem to be very acceptable in the society but they convey a very clear message that they are strong individuals craving to create a new identity in the society. They want to redefine the traditional set

of moral values and very strongly claim their rights and freedom and have a desire to enjoy an equal social status with men. L. Sonia Ningthoujan writes:

As ShobhaDe's women present a new pattern of values, a new set of values has come to light with the coming of this new breed of women who are independent and assertive. The traditional moral values have undergone a total change. Manifesting their new pattern of values, these women characters may be perceived and regarded as characterless women by the majority of members of the Indian society. But the fact of the matter is that this society is itself in a state of transition. It has not yet given up the traditional values nor has it accorded recognition to the new values of the post- Independence Indian society which has emerged with its own set of moral and aesthetic values. (Image 49).

ShobhaDe's sensational novel *Strange Obsession* deals with the theme of lesbianism, relationship condemned by society L. Sonia Ningthoujan observes:

Women in De's novels want sexual pleasure outside marriage.....They want an identity outside the boundary of homes. They want their existence to be felt and recognised by all.....These women refuse to bow to tradition and convention and oppression....They believe that the world is at their feet and sky is the limit for their progress and development. These are the new modern women, a very striking group that is emerging stealthily in Indian aristocratic society and which De presents in her novels with enthusiasm and creative energy. (Image 40-41).

Strange Obsession revolves round the relationship of two young girls, Amrita an educated and beautiful girl seeking her career in modelling and Minx alias MeenakshiIyenger, a modern girl and the daughter of Inspector General of Police. Minx is an eccentric lesbian and plays all possible tricks to ensare Amrita. When Amrita refuses her love as she feels it abnormal, Minx says:

Why? Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because I belong to the same sex? Is that my only sin? You find it sickening to accept my love....but what about that animal Rover's love? That's ok you enjoy that....and don't tell me, because they are men. And it's normal. (Strange 44).

Amrita is an ambitious girl and to establish her modelling career she is involved in relationship with Rover. Lesbianism is a strange obsession for which

Minx can do anything. She is very much possessive for Amrita and cannot tolerate that she should be in a relationship with a boyfriend. Minx says to Amrita, "*I love you. I have to protect you, it's my duty.*" (Strange 36). This kind of a strange relationship is becoming the norm of society because women are revolting against the male-dominated society and just revere their freedom. They reject men even for the fulfilment of sexual desires. Minx has developed this strange obsession as a result of her hatred for men. L. Sonia writes in this connection:

The lesbian relationship between Amrita and Minx shows the emerging reality of the new modern women who finds sexual satisfaction with persons of the same gender. A new moral code is thus distinctly emerging....this strange relationship is just another manifestation of the new woman's intriguing mentality which undermines the traditional notion of social acceptability of marriage or legitimate sexual relationship among persons of opposite sex. (Image 38).

De's women are daunting and daring and enjoy much freedom. The image of traditional women is shattered in the fiction of Shobha De. For traditional women discussing sex issues is a taboo but the women of De have no inhibition even to be involved in lesbian relationships because they do not want to be exploited by men and want to shatter their belief that women depend on men for sexual pleasure. They do not want to depend on men for their biological needs rather they can satiate it by indulging in lesbian relationship. They revolt against being the personal property in possession of their husband. Reputed French critic Simone de Beauvoir observes:

Between women love is contemplative, caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to create the self through her, separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat. (The Second Sex 155).

All the protagonists of ShobhaDe's fiction are engaged in a quest for identity and ultimately, they come with flying colours. Being the victim of patriarchal setup, they are protesting against it and challenging male domination. They are self-assertive and confident. According to L. Sonia:

ShobhaDe's women go all out in enjoying the status as the new modern woman. They shatter the age-old concept of the traditional Indian woman with their assertive, individualistic and carefree attitude towards

life. In this new image the new women have got extreme independence in almost every field. (Image 61).

UN Sustainable Development Goal is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. The former UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet once predicted that the 21st century will be the century of girls and women and UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres also said that 21st century must be the century of women's equality.

The fiction of Shobha De materializes the above prediction and the statement about women's status in 21st century. De's women are unique as they have different identity of their own. They have their own rule books for social and moral conduct. They send a strong message to conservative patriarchal society that now they will not accept the suppression and are raising their standard through education and employment and definitely the 21st century belongs to them and their emancipation.