



THEMES OF NEW WOMAN IN SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Shobha De occupies a distinctive place as a journalist as well as novelist in the literary world of India. She is renowned for bold and frank style of writing. She explored the lives of bored housewives and their loveless rich husband and family. Her popularity as a novelist rests with her ability to portray sensitive aspects of human life, social and sexual relationship and women's psychology with a touch of open-heartedness as part of training and influence of the western culture. It appears that Shobha De's woman exploits her physical potential more daringly and confronts her male counterpart in every field of activity where the latter had been enjoying unquestioned supremacy and domination through centuries. Her novels mirror the life styles of the elite and the middle classes of urban world. She does not hesitate to deal with sex. She always tries to give her female characters their own identity in the society making them bold, confident and professional in urban atmosphere. She successfully depicts evils of corrupt urban culture and salvation of main characters from these evils. However, in reality, ultimately, it is not a salvation or an escape, but an acceptance of reality.



KEYWORDS: *human life, social and sexual relationship and women's psychology.*

INTRODUCTION

She presents the concept of the 'New Woman' who is new literary female model, assertive and self-willed, searching to discover her true self. Thus she constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice against the male-dominance by presenting The new woman is in fact an urban middle -class woman who still suffers but not in silence as she used to be. Her 'Sister' is a story of corrupt urban culture where human relationship has lost all its values. At the same time, it is a tale about emotional bond between two sisters, Mallika (Mikki) and Alisha. They are the daughters, one legitimate and the other illegitimate, of big time businessman Hiralal who dies at the beginning of the story. The story revolves around the corrupt urban world of business in Bombay. It is full of sex, betrayal, hatred, intrigue and corruption. Her novel *Sisters* deals with the psychic conflict of woman protagonist who is caught between a personal self and a societal self. *Sisters* is a story of the life of young men and women of the urban world where love and virtues are dead. De mirrors in it the modern urban culture where family lost its all values and children witness the parental indifference and seems least connected to family. The major characters, Mikki and Alisha pass through the unpleasant experiences of life and they eventually realize their freedom – a freedom to live a life of their own choice. The death of the parents made both Mikki and Alisha struggle hard to retain the position which

their father had left for them. Mikki is neither shocked nor upset by the tragic death of her parents. She is a stranger even to the funeral ritual and the crowd. The novelist describes her loneliness in these words, ***“Her parents were dead. There was nobody she cared for. And nobody who cared for her.”*** In the beginning of the novel itself one understands that she is compelled by the untimely death of her parents to leave America for Mumbai and shoulder the responsibility of her father's business. Though she is too young, she is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt. Being an educated, liberated young woman without any legitimate guardian to look after her, she attends many parties and comes in contact with many young men such as Navin, Shanay and Binny Malhotra who are interested in her only for sexual pleasures. First she deals with Navin and then turns to Malhotra and finally marries him. This shows that for Mikki, the new modern woman the old concept of morality arising out of love for one and the same person is outdated.

The women enjoy life through the act of love before and after marriage and even outside marriage. This reveals that their concept of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a tremendous change.

Mikki suffers throughout her marital life and it is through her suffering that she realizes the art of living. As a modern young woman she is bold enough to express her disagreement with her husband's concept of marriage. She asserts that her husband and she did not imagine the sort of marriage she was looking for. She continued that she thought they would be doing things together but she only sees him only at parties. Mikki also struggle in her professional life which results from her desire for freedom. She is financially independent but she thinks that the materialistic pleasures are nothing without the freedom of self. As a result, she fights for the freedom of self. It is during her struggle one day suddenly and unexpectedly she receives a strong blow as Binny goes in for divorce and turns her out of his home. Mikki realizes her husband Binny Malhotra's hypocrisy. This results into her determination for retaining her dignity and ownership of industries. It is at this stage that Binny with his illegitimate family meets his death. However, Mikki's experience with Binny gives her an insight into her 'being' as a woman and an individual. Binny's death changes the course of her life completely. It transforms her into a mature woman. Her encounters with different men help her to develop into an independent woman who at the cost of her individuality finally saves the Hiralal Industries.

Alisha another character stands for desire of liberation for women in sexual matters. She ignores the social norms and moral codes and freely enjoys sex with different men. First she goes to Navin for sexual fulfillment and after several sexual encounters with him turns to Dr Kurien. In one of the sensational scenes while enjoying sex with Alisha, Dr. Kurien says, “All you rich women are the same – you want more all the time. Nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all....it is free” . This frank and candid outlook to sex continues till the end of the novel. Alisha is determined to smash the traditional image of woman. She indulges in free sex using men as playthings. She wants Dr. Kurien to leave his wife and children and marry her. But being a Catholic, he rejects her will and remains faithful to his wife. Dr Kurian While expressing his disapproval he tells Alisha, “for women like you – men are playthings. Today you want to break up my marriage. Tomorrow you will get bored and move on to some other man. Where will that leave me?” Alisha, a lovable young woman leads a flirtatious life. Though it seems a breach of moral code, it is a pointer to the arrival of a new value system and a mode of self-assertion.

Here Alisha appears as an emerging New Woman. Her relationship with Dr. Kurien is purely physical and for temporary sexual pleasure devoid of any emotional fervour. In her attitude and behaviour, she is similar to her sister Mikki. Thus De's women break all sorts of taboos and feel liberated. Sex for them is a strong reality and it is their biological need. They do not remain passive. Instead they actively participate in it and talk about it openheartedly. It is in this respect that they differ considerably from the traditional Indian women for whom sex is shameful. Shobha De seems to show the arrival of 'new women' who rebel against the existing subordination and passivity of woman.

Married and unmarried women, high class and middle class women in Shobha De's strive for sexual liberty. Taarini, a middle-class working woman asserts her love for Shashi, despite her husband and children. Her following statement to Mikki is a bitter commentary on urban women: “You think

only rich socialites are entitled to other relationships? Well, let me tell you that the man I am involved with is not rich or powerful like your husband or like any of the other men you know. He is a humble trade unionist. He works in my office and I admire his guts. Of course, he is married. But so what? He is honest, principled, committed to his cause". Taarini is a 'new woman' for she justifies "other relationships" and asserts the right of a woman to have her own identity and individuality. In this connection, her statement is worth quoting: "it is not only glamorous, beautiful women who have affairs. Even an ordinary woman like me sometimes finds someone who loves her, cares for her, wants to spend his life with her" The woman like Taarini establishes a successful and happy relationship with young men who allow her to experience what love is, what sex is.

The end of the *Sisters* is happy as there is reconciliation between two sisters. Finally it is Mikki who wins over her step sister Alisha by her sincere love. Blood relationship ultimately triumphs over hatred. Though Mikki is affected by T.B. and Alisha is addicted to drugs, there is reconciliation between them because both the sisters realize the need to live together. Mikki inherits Binny Malhotra's wealth after his death and thus the sisters look forward to a better tomorrow. They both decide to depart to London. Their departure to London is, therefore, a kind of salvation from the evils of corrupt business world with an eye on a complete cure, change and acceptance of life. In the lounge they find two smart young Indians going to London by the same flight and are attracted towards them. Alisha chooses one of the two Indians going to London with them. Mikki smiles and looks out through the window at the twilight sky outside. Now the sisters are completely free and self-reliant, enjoying free existence.

Shobha De in her novel 'Socialite Evenings' explores the lives of the wealthy urban Indians who are engaged in sexual promiscuity. It projects a new breed of woman who demands equality with man in all walks of life. She describes Mumbai High Society with all its glamour and dirt. Sexuality is highlighted from the point of view of the physical need. She portrays the modern woman Karuna in her novel who is aware of her "otherness" and wants to break out. She is not submissive and compromising to the dogmas, to the traditional set pattern, rather she dons herself as she grows into a different woman. She develops in herself an urge to the fascinating modern world of different girls who become models. She signs an assignment secretly which lands her in the "lewd and clandestine world of modeling --- as the "Terkosa Girl". Karuna asserts her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. She is accused of lechery and bitchiness by Anjali, when Karuna dates with the New Delhi ad film maker in London. She stays in the US and becomes more assertive by rejecting to succumb to the hegemony of the malist culture. "Socialite Evenings" gives us the picture of marginalized Indian Woman at the hands of their husbands.

Marriage of Karuna proves to be a total disaster. It lacks love, faith and bonding. Karuna feels that she has married to a wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. Her husband is unexciting, uninspiring, untutored. He was not made for introspection. She has only a formal relationship with her husband. Even she never calls her husband by his name but in a derogatory term such as a 'Black Label'. There is no intimacy between them. The relationship between them is totally deprived of mutual understanding, love and affection. She protests about her meaningless marital relationship. She is agonized and says that he really make her sick. She further continues to say that she thinks their marriage was over the day their awful honeymoon started. Karuna is not afraid; she faces it boldly and defiantly for she realizes "marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to". Despite her detest for her husband's callous attitude she never feels demoralized. Rather like a "new woman" she fights back, resists and shouts back. She is full of facts and fantasy. She craves for physical desire which finds reflection in her fantasies. Locked up in a fragile and futile marital knot she has become frigid. Her pursuit finds respite in Girish in whom she finds psychological and emotional fulfillment. She wanted to be whole and without a man, woman is a fragment, a partial self. Spiritually Karuna is spotless and unsullied. Karuna plays different roles in different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor writer and a paramour. As a free woman she has her own way and frees to choose her ways and means and unveils and unfurls herself to activate the creative urge stifled within herself.

Karuna's incompatible unhappy married life leads her to boredom. And at this stage that she meets Krish, an old friend of her husband. This association and company of Krish makes her mind to revolt against her insensitive husband. Her emotional and psychological needs started getting satisfied by him. This results in developing an extra-marital relationship with him.

Karuna's husband are most insensitive, unexciting, uninspiring, inhuman persons who are completely engrossed in his own world and unaware of emotional demands of his sensitive wife. In the beginning, Karuna tries to adjust and make a compromise to save her marriage. However, she comes in open rebellion and admits her extra-marital relations just in front of her husband. Frankly, unabashedly and boldly she tells her husband that she loves his friend and want herself with him in Venice.

Then on Karuna indulges in promiscuous sex, and makes her husband either to tolerate or ignore it. She openly accepts her deviant behaviour and challenges her husband. She further points out to her husband that his failure to understand her as a woman is the real cause of her unusual and unacceptable behaviour. Even she goes a step further by giving divorce to her husband. She decided to lead a single life because she wanted to assert her individuality. The struggle of Karuna, therefore, does not remain confined only to her but becomes representative struggle of the modern women to be free and self-reliant.

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. She even verbally abuses her husband when he comes with the proposal to remarry her. Karuna prefers 'friendship' to permanent subjugation and hence also rejects the proposal of Ranbir Roy. There is a contrast between Karuna and her mother in their attitude towards the institution of marriage. Karuna's traditional mother advises Karuna to marry the right person. A woman cannot live alone; it is not safe. But this view of her mother is full of improbabilities because is it possible for the girl to marry 'the right one' and is it possible to attain 'security' and 'peace' in modern society, particularly in the urban setting of Mumbai? Hence, the feminist voice is raised by Karuna when she questions her mother, why security should rest with a man. She says that she was earning as much as any man. she says . shecan't make any "sacrifices". Her statements reflect her desire for the affirmation of her self. 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. But she is a lone rebel who passes from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, and from weakness to strength. It is at this stage she takes decisions on her own, free of all influences, for example, with her hard earned money, she buys a "cheapie round trip-ticket" to go to America. Anjali and Ritu, the two other important women characters in the novel differ considerably from Karuna. They, like her, do not challenge the patriarchal system. Though Anjali defies the traditional norms of moral values and rises to the social status of upper classes, she cannot live without husband. First she marries Abe, to get exploited and later get divorce from him. Then she marries Kumar Bhandari. However, this second marriage of Anjali changes the course of her life completely because her husband turns homosexual. In spite of this fact she does not break it.

Ritu, a friend of Karuna, also leaves her husband for Gul, the underworld don, which turns her into a whore and a pimp. Thus after having suffered mentally and physically at the hands of her lover, she returns to her husband. But Ritu on the other hand invents a strategy to keep her husband within her control. She tells Karuna about this strategy : The trick is to make them feel you have done them a favour by marrying them. Once you achieve that, the equation works out. ... Make them feel insecure. Let them think you will walk out on them if they don't toe the line. That is what keeps them in their place. The novelist presents the modern women in a new bold role who stops being the toy.

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