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Status of women in modern society

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Abstract

The new generation of feminism embraces beauty and power of women's sexuality to achieve their needs. They consider sexual pleasure a human right. Many writers in India have talked of pleasure and its manifestations. The heroines in Ms. De's novels rebuild their lost fortunes; make all efforts to look glamorous by losing weight and spending money in massage parlours. They try to look and act differently from the conventional and traditional women. They love to fall in love with their looks by which they try to attract people. It gives them immense pleasure when people fall head to heels in love with them and they are least concerned about it.

Shobha De's doesn't believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere help mates at home. Shobha De as a writer tries to mirror or portray her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the good old image of women who can't live the way she wants to and do things the way she wants to.

Keywords: women, right, status

Introduction

Shobha De's women characters are very frank about their expression of sexual desire by snubbing the sexual morality which is essentially ordained for women in the patriarchal system existing in India. Their reference to the sexual act in unambiguous terms shatters the traditional image of women that presents her as a submissive, docile, calm and meek.

The writer's bold expression regarding sex is clearly visible from the following lines of Snapshots (1995): "We don't dismiss it. We don't find it dirty. Sex doesn't threaten us. I'm not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, chastity. It's pathetic." Sometimes Shobha De has been charged of commercializing women while expressing sex in a much elaborated detail but what I've felt after reading her novels is that she has tried to fight for the cause of women and has brought out the aspect of sex because she feels that women are marginalized even in terms of sex. They are made slaves in the hands of their husbands by making them satisfy their demands whenever they need it. They get cruel and rude even in love making and get enjoyment out of it.

Shobha De has portrayed men deriving pleasure by torturing a woman by beating their naked body with hunters or hurting them with making bruises and giving them pain. Therefore the writer has portrayed her women in such a way that they are sexually liberated and use sex on their own terms.

In Shobha De's Novels Today's women should become self-sufficient and economic independent and then the system based on their dependence on men will shatter. In Shobha De's fictional world, successful working women are no Utopian dreams. They live their lives as they please and take care of their mental health. These new women earn enough to sustain them and stand by their own strength without any support from any man.

De's women break the general social rules which keep them under the supremacy of males. They are anxious to establish their separate, individual identity. They are not happy to be recognized as the wives of Mr. so and so. They crave for their own space and achieve it in the face of all odds. They are not afraid to take up challenges to achieve their desired goals. They have realized the new reality of their right to equality with man. They need and use man as a ladder to wealth and status. The present article highlights De's women economic independence as a bludgeon in their fight against patriarchy. Thus De's women characters search for independence makes them fiercely career-oriented unlike the traditional women who always rely on men for all kinds of moral and economic support.

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Almost every female character in De's novels desire for power of controlling money-matters enjoys power of controlling money matters and battle to control power of money-matters.

Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers who have been termed as "New Woman?". These so called new women are much more physically active and athletically strong than their mothers. Feminist- New Style, a journal (1927) declared that "The new woman is a blend of physical freedom, sexuality and stamina with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic feminist, a woman who can combine pleasure, career and marriage. They are eager to participate in pleasure as they would do in play, work etc."

All her heroines, be it Karuna, Aparna, Mikki, Alisha or Asha Rani are rebellious modern Indian women who challenge the orthodoxy of social taboos. They are different from the sexually ignorant Indian woman which is quite contradictory to most Indian male writers who feel that sex is as unpleasant subjection to man's desire- necessary in order to have offspring.

Shobha De's women challenge this traditional set up in the society. Her women are far more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison to men. They are not submissive, and guilty of their affairs.

Sujata, in Sultry Days (1994) is a prostitute, who does what her mind says. This gives her pleasure. Life is defined on her own terms. When Asha Rani, in Starry Nights (1991) the famous heroine of Bollywood decides to quit films all of a sudden when she is at the peak of her career just to live with a fellow co star, Akshay Arora, her mother tries to dissuade her from doing it. Then she argues in this way in "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up being your money machine. I have done enough for everybody- you, Sudha and others- now I want to live for myself.

Asha Rani designs herself a code of conduct for herself which is free from the prescribed gender rules and sexual constraints. This shows clearly that women in Shobha De's novels can't be always taken for granted that they will be dutiful and self sacrificing daughter to their parents. They will certainly revolt when their self interest is at stake.

They may face hurdles but they are smart enough to ignore them and break these hurdles very skillfully and tactfully and emerge out of it comfortably. The novelist has portrayed her women characters in such a way that the readers get a clear picture of her intentions. She has tried her best to expose the normal and spiritual break down of the society which she thinks is in helpless state.

Therefore she has understood the human psyche which has made her take a thorough look at the age old customs which bars a woman from doing certain things which she likes to do but is unable to because of the rigid bonds she is bounded with.

In Second Thoughts she selects the middle class society and the suffering of so many married women due to traditional arrange marriage system. Second Thoughts (1996) is the seventh novel of Shobha De. It describes the agony of Maya, who feels trapped in matrimony. Jaydipsinh Dodiya comments that the theme of novel focuses on "the hollowness of Indian marriage"

De explores the female psyche against male ego, the dutiful wife, the overbearing mother-in-law, the social pretence and public facades in Second Thoughts. Maya, a middle class

Bengali girl in Calcutta wanted to move to Bombay to escape her dull life. But she found herself trapped by an arranged marriage to Ranjan who was highly conservative and completely indifferent to her desires. She became utterly lonely.

At this time she was acquainted to Nikhil, a charming college going boy and a tale of love and betrayal started. Maya, neglected and criticized by her husband and exploited and deceived by her lover, remained a silent sufferer. She was unable to find happiness and satisfaction within marriage and her extra-marital relation also made her utterly frustrated.

The novel shows the novelist's insight into human nature. It represents psychic-cum-social complexities of middle class society. Maya, a textile designer with a dream of becoming a journalist came to Bombay to meet Ranjan Malik with a marriage proposal. Maya was an attractive young girl with warm and rich golden brown skin tone, gleaming jet black hair and large dark eyes. Maya was more fascinated and in love with Bombay.

Research Study

Women in upper class society have no concern about public. The concept of morality arising out of love for one and the same person is considered to be outdated. The women in Shobha De's novels believe in breaking the age old traditions of enjoying life with pre- marital affairs and extramarital affairs. She takes a plunge extra into the hearts of the liberated upper class women in contemporary Indian society. De's images of the new woman resemble the ones depicted in the day-to- day wall-posters in public streets. De's women work to make themselves economically independent. They are usually well established women with high profile careers. Women's contribution to work was started way back during the First World War when they represented and worked alongside men and actively participated in rendering their services to the country. Not only they performed their work wholeheartedly, but they were also applauded by everyone for their dedicated service.

The entry of women into the professional world was seen as a threat to the patriarchal system who opined that a woman should render her service to the society as a wife, mother or a daughter. If they indulged in coming out of their house and working outside, they would never be able to do justice to their role. In an attempt to stop them from going to work, they were alleged with immoralities and thereby posing threat to the stable family lives. This was one of the major reasons for the rise of Feminist Movement.

Feminism is a movement which advocated for establishing and defending equal rights for women. It aims at providing political, economic and social rights to them. The activists who fight for these rights are called as feminists. They have campaigned tirelessly for women's rights in the field of contracts, property, voting rights and also reproductive rights.

The Feminist Movement opposed domestic violence, sexual harassment etc. Feminists have fought for providing workplace rights which included providing equal pay package and opportunities for enhancing their careers to be successful entrepreneurs.

Shobha De is a writer who has actively participated in Feminist Movement without being called herself as a feminist. She says wisely: "I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag" The role of women is undergoing a massive dramatic change

worldwide. Women today have succeeded in sharing podium alongside men in almost all fields. Women have joined hands to hands in becoming team leaders, CEO's, managers in the corporate world.

However, the number of women in managerial positions is still alarmingly low which may be due to various factors. For example, women find it more comfortable to stick to their roles as homemaker and for this reason they are ready to quit their jobs if it's the demand of their family.

Secondly, maternity leave also poses another reason for their discontinuity in their jobs. As a result of which very few women succeed in getting the top positions in the corporate world.

Shobha De writes mostly about urban elite women and has effectively highlighted their problems. She has got the mind with the sharpness of an eagle which has captured the plight of women in corporate world.

Shobha De has vehemently opposed the gender discrimination in workplace and has advocated for equivalence of power shared between both men and women. New Indian women who have already attained economic independence are a breed apart from others. They enjoy economic independence and their attitude is characterized by a rare seriousness.

In article, Independent Woman, What a Laugh, dated Aug 24th 2010 she wrote, "Our conversation was restricted to children, cooking and maids. (all these were declared hazardous to health, more so than cigars and booze) She further writes that this conversation was not between bored or pampered housewives, but it was between first class corporate professionals who earned approximately same, if not more than their husbands. Still they were cribbing about traditional household domestic issues that belonged to their grandmother's era."

According to Shobha De, women in business are not given much importance even though they wore business suits to their workplace and carried burgundy coloured brief cases and they took their jobs on earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity by men. In fact work interests for women have become fashionable.

Situation of Women

Being feminist De's novels raise a strong protest against the male dominated Indian society where women are denied freedom to act and live according to their will. They are considered as mere shadows of men and treated as the other. They are not accepted as equal to men. However, in this fast changing world, the role of women in the society too, has been changing fast, affecting greatly the sexual mores and social norms prevalent in the society.

Shobha De reacts against the male culture and strongly detests the marginalization of women. She does not believe in depicting her women characters as slaves or just helpmates at home. But she is the first to explore the world of urban women of higher social strata. In urban area male hegemony is no longer acceptable as women have started thinking for themselves. A closer study of her novels reveals her protest against the image of woman as an auxiliary. In the patriarchal Indian society a woman is assigned only the secondary role.

Feminism is a socio- political movement which advocates involved active participation by women to demand for their rights. It can be considered a movement which is fought against female oppression under patriarchy. There are

various ways by which a woman can be victimized or we can say that victimization of woman can take place through various ways like caste, color, race, attitude towards motherhood, etc. The Feminist movement was actually started by white women who basically hailed from middle class in Western Europe and North America.

This trend accelerated in 1960's with Cool Right Movement and the collapse of European Colonialism in Africa, Caribbean parts of Latin America and South Asia. Third Wave feminists advocate for equal rights for the girls and taking charge of their own sexual fulfillment. In her essay, Lusting for Freedom, Rebecca Walker discusses the need for sex education for young women. It recognizes that sexual pleasure is a central part of women's lives and does not discourage women who know how to achieve it without any sense of guilt or regret.

Again Karuna's observations on men are quite interesting: All the husbands of my friends more or less fell into this pattern. They were not evil men, but what they did to our lives went beyond evil. We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was 'You don't really count, except in the context of my priorities.' It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our heads and four square meals a day. (Socialite Evenings, 69)

Talking of all the years of experience behind her Anjali holds the following views: 'Men just feel terribly threatened by self-sufficient women. They prefer girls like me-dependent dolls. We make... I felt like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motions of house keeping and playing wife but the resentment and rebellion remained just 201 under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation. (Socialite Evenings, 69)

Karuna's husband is not a cruel person and he even throws away all her sins like her affairs with Girish. Later, when she leaves her husband's house and starts living with Anjali "the idea of keeping the baby" does not sink into her system firmly. Once again the consideration is herself, whether her parents would accept her with the child. She gives an inkling of her thoughts after her husband has talked to her at length about the settlement.

"For a couple of days after his call I actually toyed with the idea of keeping the baby. May be it was just spite, may be a felt it was what I needed... someone to call my own as the cliché goes." (Socialite Evenings, 222)

The age-old institutions of marriage and family are under tremendous strain in Shobha De's novels. The neo-rich Indians in her novels, particularly educated, beautiful and attractive and competent, confident and assertive socialite women seem to define marriage afresh, in which fidelity in married life is replaced by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be put to an end depending upon the whims of the partners. Her novel Starry Nights is a blend of the 'mirror' and the 'vamp' approaches to feminism. Both approaches launch a frontal assault on society and its various male-dominated institutions.

An analysis of Shobha De's novels reveals that her women characters try to strike between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. They are bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them and when they face loneliness and lack of communication and are

finally brought to mental crisis when masculine and institutional pressures are added to exacerbate them further. Also, women in Shobha's novels symbolize the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality that characterizes the modern age. With the crumbling of moral and ethical values there is an inner conflict which drives the modern Indian women to take shelter in different identities for momentary solace.

Significance of the Study

The traditional society has assigned the role of providing security to the wife by the husband. The only thing which these emancipated women can do in a fit of boldness is to abuse the man in words which even coarse, illiterate women would not use in public. We have only to recall what Karuna tells when she meets him in the Oberoi Hotel and enquires about her friend Anjali, "Listen Asshole – Don't give me your fancy lines. You are nothing but cheap male whore. Why don't you leave Ritu alone?" (Socialite Evenings, 112) Also, Karuna thinks she has become one-up and vindicated herself as a woman by abusing her husband verbally when he comes with the proposal to remarry her, "And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don't ever want to see you again. I let you in this time... but never again I'll call the cops if you try and invade my home in future. You are even more of a warm 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. Now take your frigging pipe and out!?" (Socialite Evenings, 264) For women like Anjali marriage also becomes a necessity because it not only provides them security, status and luxuries, but it also enables them to indulge in adultery, for adultery is possible only within marriage. It might begin as a possible escape from a 'meaningless marriage' as happens in the case of Karuna's affair with Krish but once it is discovered she is advised against going on 'guilt-trip' by Anjali.

Despite these facets of a woman's personality, In Socialite Evenings Karuna fights her way up after her divorce, gets recognition in advertising and television productions and becomes financially independent. This novel of Shobha De presents the aesthetics of feminism and emancipation of women.

Shobha De has become the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge.

These women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit. Marriage for them is an insurance against social values. Her novels can be thematically classified into three groups: firstly, Socialite Evenings and Second Thoughts are the novels that deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, quest for Identity, struggle for survival and marginality.

Secondly, Starry Nights, Sisters and Strange Obsession (1992) move around the life in film industry, Bollywood and concentrate basically on lust and sex. And finally, the novels Sultry Days (1994) and Snapshots (1995) present them anticipation of women and project the ultra-modern lifestyle of neo-rich people.

Conclusion

Shobha De's fiction portrays the contemporary reality of the rich elite people whether they are rich businessman, politicians, Bollywood actors, producers, doctors and industrialists. She delves deep into the hearts of the people and exposes the reality to the world without aiming to harm anyone. She is straight forward and talks with guts and fearlessness focusing her work to rule out the dangers developing in the society and to bring the awareness in the society. Her work is unique, innovative and interesting.

De is a true artist who judges the demand of her modern characters. She is the first among the feminists who lifted the condition of modern elite females of contemporary India. An alliance with a man grants a woman heterosexual privileges, many of which are redefined by the law; religion and families. But, the woman has to pay its price at her own cost, since she has to destroy herself, her voice, intellect, and personal development, for a man's need, in these alliances. Thus, Shobha De rejects compulsory heterosexuality and suggests woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to woman relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. She also refuses to participate in the game of competition for man. She confronts her own sexuality and challenges the norms placed upon her by culture or society. As a writer, she is gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss the sensitive aspects of human life and human relationship tactfully. The power of her narration is just wonderful. She is totally different from other Indian women novelists in English. She is gifted with intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. Her novels expose the hollowness of marital relations in elite class.

Her novels contain frank description of sex life. For that she is criticized as "Vatsyayani" "Soft porn queen", "Pasha of pulp", "Vamp Feminist", etc. and has never been considered as a serious writer. But a serious reading of her novels shows that she is a sensitive and serious writer. She is an author who dared to unearth those issues of man-woman relationship which were never put to public by any woman writer.

From Socialite Evenings to Second Thoughts, Shobha De discusses the problems of women in patriarchal society, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship and the emergence of live-in relationship. Through her novels, she makes her readers to introspect about fast fading love, pleasure and satisfaction in marital relations. In all the earlier novels she dealt with the valueless, moral less world of high society.

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