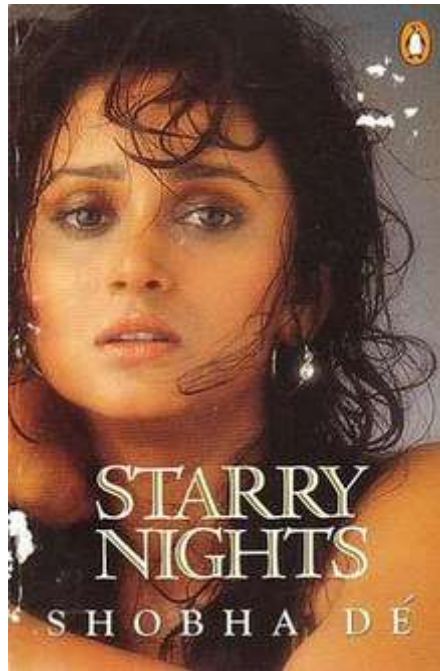


## Shobha De's Feministic Approach in her Novel "Starry Nights"

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Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starry\\_Nights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starry_Nights)

### Abstract

Shobha De is one of the most popular Indian woman writers who has created a niche for herself in the realm of fiction by her tremendous writing and feministic approach in almost all her novels and articles. Her novels are undoubtedly a slice of urban life. She reveals the plight of Indian traditional woman especially the condition of the woman in the present-day society. Keeping this in mind, this present paper deals with the feministic approach in the novel "Starry Nights" by Shobha De. Feminism is a world-famous movement which promotes granting the same political, social and economical rights to females as those enjoyed by males. Women's efforts to seek their self-identity and independence started a revolution all over the world which was termed by critics as "Feminism". It can be considered a movement which is fought against female oppression and male dominancy. It reveals that sexual pleasure plays a pivotal role in part of women's lives and does not discourage woman who knows how to achieve it without any sense of guilt or regret. The new generation of feminism embraces beauty and power of women's sexuality to achieve their needs. They consider sexual pleasure as human rights. Many writers in India have talked of pleasure and its manifestations but Shobha De's Novels has given us a new dimension to ponder over it.

**Keywords:** Shobha De, *Starry Nights*, Feminism, Agony, Suffering, Psychic, Society's Norms and Rights

## Introduction

Shobha De, the most esteemed novelist has fought with full energy against all the traditional beliefs, taboos and moral values denouncing them inferior to man. Gradually it turned into an explicit annoyance and in the end, it took shape of an open rebellion since the ancient age. Many women writers have written plenty of novels, but all their novels depicted the picture of life as it is seen through the eyes of a man and not from the eyes of a woman. But Shobha De breaks the world of English fiction by shifting from Man's angle to woman's angle and emphasis from the external world to the internal world. Her novels mirror the upper class urban milieu, particularly that of females. She depicts the life of an Indian woman in a modern changing and conflict-torn Indian society. No doubt her female characters are bold, daring and courageous enough to break all the myths and norms of the old age society as they do not wish to lead a life of a slave and dependent person.

Narendar Kumar Neb in his articles, "Shobha De: To Read or Not to Read" clearly remarks, "De treatment of female sexuality gives impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behavior as a means of women's emancipation. But the reality is different, and De's real concern are rather otherwise, Her prime concern is to expose the futility and meaningless of such kind of pseudo feminist behavior." (163)

## Protagonists in Shobha De's Novels

The protagonists in Shobha De's novels rebuild their lost fortunes; make all possible impossible efforts to look glamorous and appealing by losing weight and spending money in massage parlours. They make arduous efforts 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 towards them. 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 does not believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere help mates at home.

As a writer Shobha De tries to portray her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. A deep evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the good old image of woman who can't live the way she wants to and do things the way she wants to. 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 femininity, a woman who can combine pleasure, career and marriage. They are eager to participate in pleasure as they would do in play, work etc."

## Shobha De's Heroines

All her heroines, whether it is Karuna, Aparna, Mikki, Alisha or Asha Rani all are the images of rebellious modern Indian women who make a challenge to the orthodoxy of social norms and taboos. They all are different from the sexually ignorant Indian woman which is quite contradictory to the most Indian male writers who feel that sex is an unpleasant subjection to man's desire- necessary in order to have offspring. Shobha De's heroines 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 having their affairs. They do not mind in having pre-marital or post marital affairs with others. Sujata, in *Sultry Days* (1994) is a kind of prostitute, who does what her mind says. This gives her pleasure. Life is defined on her own terms. When the main protagonist 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

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of her career just to live with a fellow costar, 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’ve done enough for everybody- you, Sudha and others- now I want to live for myself. (106)

This clearly indicates that Asha Rani herself designs a code of conduct for herself which is free from the prescribed gender rules and sexual constraints. This also reveals 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 successfully and comfortably. Her females are not submissive in nature at all in spite of that they are truly rebellious and defiant in nature as they are not ready to bear any kind of discrimination on the part of anyone.

### **Intent of the Author Always Explicit**

Shobha De has portrayed her female 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 breakdown 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 do because of the rigid rules and regulations she is bounded with. Her women do not like to feel like a fettered bird. They wish to rise high and fly like a bird enjoying full freedom in her realm.

Generally, women in upper-class society have no concern about other 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 shackles of age old traditions of enjoying life with premarital affairs and extra- marital affairs. She takes a deep plunge extra into the hearts of the liberated upper-class women in contemporary Indian society.

### **Sex and Sensuality**

Sex and sensuality are a part of life and in order to accept life one has to affirm sensuality. A woman doesn’t consider love and honesty a virtue while seeking pleasure. Shobha De depicts women in their true colors. They are depicted as what they actually are and not what they should have been. That is why real pleasure is defined differently for different people. It may mean erotic sex for some women while it may be soft touch and sensual love making as described between Mikki and her husband Binny Malhotra on the moonlit night in his place before their marriage.

The new concept of pleasure envisages complete sexual freedom which is accompanied by economic freedom; uncontrolled passion is sought by Shobha De’s women in the form of pleasure. In India social rules have always been harsh on women. It is justified that a man as an independent being can have extra marital affairs. The society doesn’t raise eye-brows to those men who leave their wife at home and enjoy with either prostitutes or whores by paying them in cash or kind. No one bothers to think about the woman who is lonely in her home waiting for her husband who doesn’t come nights after nights. What she would do in such situation? She can’t take her life or ruin herself by crying. A woman is socially not complete without the existence of man in her life and it’s debarred to enjoy any sexual liaison with any man other than her husband. Her desire for sexual relationship is subordinated to the interest of the society not on her individual feeling.

## **Taboos**

Rigorous taboos of our society forbid women to have any sort of sexual liaisons by breaking the rigid laws of matrimony in India. However, women in Shobha De's novels are broad minded enough to continue with their flings and affairs without bothering about the matrimonial alliance of their partners. These women are confident and are reasonable enough to justify their relationship. This relationship is best exhibited in the relationship between Asha Rani and Akshay Arora in *Starry Nights* (1991).

Her heroines are not ready to obey and follow the superficial and hollow social rules which are made by men and the so called orthodox society. Shobha De's women dare to move around and seek pleasure with anyone they like to overcome their mental fatigue. The general norms stated by the society for a woman is to show herself as an active participant in sexual alliance. She is taught not to exhibit her sexual appetite and to participate boldly in sensual activities. Under this servile position, she doesn't have to express her sexual urge which is considered to be against the social taboos. Shobha De's women frame their own culture by breaking these social norms of the society. While writing about women, she doesn't have to be unrealistic because she involves herself completely while writing novels and portraying her women as various characters which she couldn't have realized if she had written about male characters.

## **Independent Approach to Life**

Shobha De's women have found different ways of seeking pleasure and they don't hesitate to design their own attitude and behavior which may vary from their counterparts. They are mostly urban women who give less or no importance to the morality and spirituality. They want to be free from the established gender biasness and sexual restraints of the traditional society. They want to enjoy the same rights as enjoyed by the men. Men regard their women as commodities that can be brought or sold at their own terms and conditions, make women dance to their tunes, and mould them in the concept of traditional servility and make them stand meekly and submissively and suffer emotionally, thus women are made to suffer and they have to strive hard to discover the human in them. Shivike Verma in his article "The Novels of Shobha De: A Feminist Study" truly says:

## **Sexuality – A Weapon and a Problem**

Shobha De has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the tradition Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of sex-oriented and sex-centered in the male dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains of husband and society, reactionary and rebel, and 'new woman' and 'a liberated human being.' (192)

Sex contributes a lot in providing pleasure to the women in Shobha De's novels. The writer feels that sex should not be despised or something to be afraid of. She has spoken about the beauty of sex and the change it brings in to the lives of men and women. She has spoken about sex in the following way in *Snapshots* (1995): "Sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three letter word in India, is enough to celebrate."(3) In the urban world a modern woman tries to do anything that comes to her mind, goes to any extent to derive pleasure of her own. The best example of it can be found in the novel *Starry Nights*, where the heartthrob of millions, queen of Bollywood, Asha Rani tries to derive pleasure in destroying men and the most dreaded weapon that she uses is 'Bed'. Men are unable to forget her once she goes to bed with them.

## **Asha Rani**

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This battle field gave Asha Rani sensual pleasure, and, in all ways, she loved it too much. She is compared to a gangster who is a very charming woman in the battlefield which is considered to be the bed. Asha Rani's game strategy is that she would first of all judge her enemy's qualities and she had expertise in it. After that when she goes to bed with him, she uses all the tricks that would make him loose out to him and thus giving her all the pleasure in the world.

Asha Rani's source of enjoyment was men and she enjoyed the game of playing love making a lot. Age was not at all a matter of concern for love making. She had sexual encounters with men of his father's age and men who were young enough to be her son like Amar who was a very young and promising star and in fact she had taken a liking for him instantly after meeting him for the first time when they were together for a movie. She had even recommended his name to the directors to cast him opposite her. To say that he was so desperate to continue with an incomplete scene of their movie in this way in *Starry Nights* (1991): "Look, remember, that scene in our movie- where the director cut to a bolt of lightning just when our lips were to meet? I'm like suffering from continuity problem. Could I that is... (29)

### **Man-Woman Relationship from a New Angle**

Shobha De has tried to portray a man-woman relationship from a new angle which may be very serious, yet they can give pleasure to the heroine at the same time. Not only this during the love making sometimes it is men who ask them not to stop and deprive them of the pleasure. It was Asha Rani who initiated the love making when she was with Akshay and she used various tricks to arouse him and give him pleasure which always culminated in sexual satisfaction and she succeeded doing it always because after the love making process, Akshay was a contended man.

This is a well-known fact that the traditional Indian woman tries to adjust her nature with her man but this is not same with the women of Shobha De. They are independent and free from social norms and moral restriction. Asha Rani, the heroine of *Starry Nights* knew it well that Akshay was married with two sons and was a family man she didn't think of sparing him from seducing and the writer has left no stone unturned to depict the very warm and intimate love making scenes between Asha Rani and Akshay Arora.

The women in Shobha De's novels don't reject female sexuality. Rather they exhibit different attitude towards sex to contest the established views about the generally and taken for granted views of the human sexual behavior. It makes these women reject the strict social environment that makes the women actually conscious of every small pleasure which may be emotional or physical. It's a very common feature in Shobha De's novels that almost all of the women experience sex with more than one person. Their rejection of sexual morality forms a part of their challenge to the patriarchal way of life that introduces certain curbs on women's behavior.

### **Commercializing Women?**

Sometimes Shobha De has been charged of commercializing women while expressing sex in much elaborated detail but after reading her novels one can easily judge 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 too. 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. Thus, the writer has portrayed her women in such a way that they are sexually liberated and use sex on their

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own terms. “And they had broken all the rules and every taboo that she had ever known. She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon.” (175)

Shobha De has also shown in other novels that a woman can be a seeker of pleasure simultaneously. They want it in various ways and the man who gives them using different tricks is very much admired by them. They love these men and can do anything for them. After getting the sexual satisfaction from her husband before marriage, Mikki immediately got married to him without giving second thoughts to her decision.

### **Obedience to Husbands**

Contradicting the myth that women should silently obey their husbands during the love making process, Shobha De’s women are aggressive and sometimes become sexually violent to destabilize the idea of male domination. Therefore, we can say that the concept of pleasure for Shobha De is complete sexual freedom with no intention of fidelity. Her women love to experience pre-marital sexual encounters, post marital affairs and love to explore the forbidden areas which is defined by the rigid norms of the society. Men are indifferent to women’s individuality, sensitivity and feelings. These women are victim of infidelity, and uncommitted relationship which makes these women seek for pleasure outside their marriage. These women are in search of personal freedom. They express their anger by resorting to what might be termed as unethical acts like indulging in extramarital affairs.

Lesbianism is a counter-revolution against the foundation of male privileged society. It refuses male authority in sexual terms where woman’s feelings and desire for sexual pleasure are discarded. In sexual arena, Shobha De’s women don’t want to be dominated as an object and as a subordinate person. In this way she has tried to prove a point that a woman is fully independent who doesn’t have to depend on a man for seeking pleasure always. She can also find her alternatives where she can discard a man out of her life as she has successfully done while seeking economic independence and marriage. Pleasure may be the source of happiness for a woman, but it is not the man who is the only alternative, rather a woman can also prove to be a seeker as well as a provider of pleasure.

### **Emergence of Liberated Women**

Through her novels De proclaims the emergence of liberated women of modern India. Following the trends of feminism ultimately her female characters find their own identity different from their subordinate identity of someone’s mother, wife and daughter. It has brought a radical change in the outlook and relationship between male and female. Overall feminism deals with the gender discrimination which is in favor of the freedom and equality for women. Her heroines raise their voice against the male centered culture and boldly oppose the marginalization of women in any way. Her characters are not just the symbols of goodness or submissive creature on the contrary they are bold enough to take their decision on their own to lead a peaceful life.

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