

**New Image of Woman in the Novels of Shoba De**  
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**Shobha De**

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**Abstract**

Shobha De is the most popular Indian Woman writer in English. Her 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 the marginalization of women

in Indian society. She draws our attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification. Shobha De rejects compulsory heterosexuality and suggests woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to women relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. Reason being a woman can work up another woman better than a man; another reason can be the revolt of the women against the society and its norms which underrate women. Female homosexuality has several names namely lesbianism, sapphism, and tribadism.

### **Need to Study Shobha De**

In spite of the substantial contribution of Shobha De to Indian Novel in English, her novels have not been fully explored. Yet no elaborate work is carried out on her novels. In terms of research she has remained completely neglected. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill in the lacuna and also to highlight how De differs from the other Indian novelists writing in English. The following novels of Shobha De are analysed in the thesis, which are thematically classified into three groups: firstly, *Socialite Evenings* (1989) and *Second Thoughts* (1996) are the novels that deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, Quest for Identity, Struggle for Survival and Marginality. Secondly, *Starry Nights* (1992), *Sisters* (1992) 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 the emancipation of women and project the ultra-

### **Indian Novel in English: Past and Present**

A modest attempt has been made to trace the development and value of Indian Novel in English, taking into consideration the substantial contribution made by the male as well as female writers to the development of Indian Novel in English. This chapter also highlights the shaping influences that contributed in the making of Shobha De as one of the famous writers of the modern era. From the historical perspective, Indian English Literature has passed through several phases such as Indo-Anglian, Indo-English, Indian Writing in English and recently Indian English Literature. Nowadays, the process of canonization of Indian English literature is completed and there is a bright prospect to it in the days of globalization. The intellectuals in India before Independence concentrated on the national awakening and the society in a realistic manner. It was a challenge for them to express distinctly an Indian sensibility in an acquired language. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's only novel in English *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) laid down the foundation for the first-generation novelists to record the rich heritage and social transformation in India. Both the male and female novelists followed him. Further, the year 1930's, with the emergence of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao on the literary scene, marked the real beginning of Indian Novel in English. In the post-Independence phase Indian Novel in English has been termed as the modern novel. Though Modernism came late to India, it has played an important role in shaping the second-generation novelists such as Bhabhani Bhattacharya, B. Rajan, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, R. P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and a few others who have made a tremendous contribution to novel in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

### **1980s and Beyond**

Unlike 1930s and 1950s, the years of 1980s mark the significant stage in the growth and development of Indian Novel in English. Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize –winner *Midnight's Children* (1981) received an international acclaim and has become a major force in world literature. It has created the Indian tradition of fiction to which belong "Rushdie's Children" (The New York Times, 16 December, 1991), viz. Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Allen Sealy, Upamanya Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Farukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry and Kiran Desai. The Indian Novel in English in the pre-Independence period mostly remained male-dominated for a very few women novelists such as Toru Dutt, Raj Lakshmi Debi, Krupabai Sathinadhan, Swarnkumari Ghosal and Cornelia Sorabji emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. But during the post-Independence period there appeared a number of women writers on the literary scene like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande as well as younger generation of Githa Hariharan, Nina Sibal, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai (winner of Booker Prize for *The Inheritance of Loss*, 2006), who contributed significantly to Indian English Novel and helped its development.

Feminism, free-sex, alienation, identity crisis or an individual's struggle for freedom are some of the thematic concerns of these women writers. In their novels, the appearance of the new, fully awakened woman, ready to fight against the patriarchal norms in order to live a meaningful life, is a recent phenomenon. The female characters created by these novelists do not accept the low secondary status in a male-dominated Indian society, that is conservative. The central theme, therefore, is the emergence of 'new woman' in the fast-changing social milieu.

### **Image of Subjugated and Marginalized Woman**

The Image of Subjugated and Marginalized Woman is devoted to the portrayal of the image of subjugated and marginalized women in Shobha De's novels with an emphasis on men's pride, incompatible marriages, traditional norms of behaviour and patriarchal social system as the real forces of the oppression and exploitation of women. 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.

### **Shoba De's Focus**

In most of her novels, Shobha De has focused on the 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.

Karuna, the protagonist of *Socialite Evenings*, is the perfect example of the misery of women in India. She suffers due to the callous and non-responsive attitude of her husband. Her husband treats her as a mere object subjected to his will as a result there is a complete loss of her identity. Similarly, Anjali, a young socialite, also suffers much because of her incompatible marriage and her husband's oppressive attitude. Here, in presenting the picture of subordination

and marginalization of Indian women, Shobha De's attack is not against the individuals, it is against the system that favours men and causes women's subjugation and marginalization.

In *Starry Nights* Shobha De has projected the shattering of human values in this glittering world of Mumbai cinema through the realistic portrayal of Aasha Rani, Geetha Devi, Malini and Rita. The other important aspect which Shobha De highlights in this and other novels is a woman's role in the oppression and suffering of her fellow woman. In our society, women ill-treat and exploit women instead of showing love, respect and understanding for their own sex. As a matter of fact, Shobha De brings out the universal psychological truth that the woman is the enemy of the woman.

In *Sisters* Mikki Hiralal is oppressed, subjugated and exploited by Binny Malhotra, a true representative of patriarchal system. The novel *Strange Obsession* revolves around the lesbian relationship between Meenakshi Iyengar called 'Minx' and Amrita, the model from Delhi. This novel deals more with how one woman subjugates the other woman than the subjugation of women by men. *Sultry Days* has a male protagonist, God who says to Nisha that "one bitch is as good as another" (252). His attitude towards girls is- "use them and leave them" (8). Such attitude of men towards women clearly shows the miserable plight and marginalization of women in our society.

In *Snapshots* the women turn into useful plaything for men in patriarchal society. The ruling ideology that favours men prompts these women to fall prey to the designs of men. All the men presented in the novel are tyrants whereas the women – Aparna, Rashmi, Swati and Noor are all victims of male tyranny. Finally, the novel *Second Thoughts* is a sad tale of Maya, an oppressed wife. She suffers from marital disharmony because her husband Ranjan considers woman as a mere object. Though an engineer, Maya is not allowed to take up even a part-time job. Instead, her husband again and again reminds her of 'tradition'. It is due to Ranjan's traditional attitude and feeling of superiority, Maya feels herself trapped in a neglected and meaningless life.

### **Image of Rebellious Woman**

The Image of Rebellious Woman deals with the image of rebellious women and their varied ways of protest against their oppression and marginalization. As a result of their exploitation and subjugation, to assert their identity, these women turn rebellious. There is a transformation on their part. Now they are aware of their rights and hence revolt against the traditional norms and fight for equality in the male-dominated Indian society.

As a feminist writer, Shobha De's novels raise a strong protest against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom to act and live according to their will. 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 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. De's novels reveal her protest

against the image of woman as an auxiliary. She destroys this distorted image of woman and therefore, the female characters in her novels appear more powerful than men.

The journey of Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* is a journey from a middle-class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Her entry in the glamorous world of modelling and friendship with Bunty, are the acts of rebellion. After marriage she establishes extra-marital relationship with Krish, revolts against her insensitive husband and finally divorces him. She also rejects the ideas of her second marriage. She does not want to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore.

The women such as Karuna, Anjali and Ritu attempt to destroy the gender discrimination – the real source of women’s oppression. The women in *Starry Nights*, in one way or the other, are related to the world of films. Aasha Rani, ‘Sweetheart of the millions’, breaks all sexual mores and social norms by her unusual and deviant behaviour. Nothing controls her desire to live a life of her own. Her sexual encounters with different men point out her sexual aggression. She defeats men at their own game and demolishes the mythical image of woman imposed by patriarchy. According to De ‘sex is the bedrock of all relationships’. Her women: Aasha Rani, Rita, Linda, Shonali and others frankly discuss and practice sex. They are bold and rebellious who protest against their exploitation and strive to assert their identity. The concept of morality arising out of love for one and the same person is out-dated. This is well illustrated by Shobha De’s *Sisters*.

The protagonist Mikki in her journey from a silent sufferer to a hard rebel, breaks all the age-old moral codes of the male-dominated world. She does not appear emotional or sentimental even on the death of her parents like the traditional Indian woman. Both Mikki and Alisha are not weak ladies of manners. On the contrary, they are pragmatic and as strong and efficient as man. The modern Indian woman who is at the centre of Shobha De’s novels is not passive in nature. She protests strongly against the forces in male-dominated world, which threaten her very individuality. Next, *Strange Obsession* is Shobha De’s rebellious novel. It highlights the lesbian relationship between Meenakshi Iyengar (Minx) and Amrita Aggarwal. Lesbianism itself is a threat to heterosexuality. In *Sultry Days*, the novelist presents a group of modern women who, when ill-treated, turn rebellious and protest. Nisha’s mother protests against her husband’s affair with his Sindhi Secretary. Sujata is another woman who does not lead a life which is defined by her husband. She makes her own rules. She has both male and female lovers. Further, the get-together of six former school friends at Reema’s house in *Snapshots* also reveals how the women are obsessed with sex and sensual enjoyment. They express their grievances against men in general and husbands in particular. They break the social norms and moral codes. Most of the women in the novel, bored with their husbands, seek new relationships outside marriage and challenge the patriarchal system.

In fact, *Snapshots* is the world of Shobha De’s Women where men stand on periphery and women fight for power and supremacy. Finally, it is through the story of love and betrayal in *Second Thoughts* that Shobha De exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy of Indian marriage system. Maya, the central character is so depressed and frustrated by the traditional attitude of her husband Ranjan that soon she establishes an extra-marital relationship with Nikhil and at last breaks the long silence.

In this article, **The Image of Liberated and Emancipated New Woman**, a modest attempt has been made to depict the image of liberated and emancipated women in Shobha De's novels. The chapter also throws a significant light on how the subjugated and marginalized women, through their rebellion, achieve liberation and emancipation. In fact, the fictional world of Shobha De is dominated by the women characters whereas the male characters are pushed into the margin. It is the woman in Shobha De's works who holds all the trump cards. She is a manipulator whose clever strategy looks beyond the male comprehension. In this respect Shobha De's woman is New Indian Woman. In 1960s, with the rise of feminism, there emerged the New Woman, who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. This New Woman is conscious, confident and sometimes even aggressive. She occupies the centre and has got rid of her position of the "other". She is now aware of her destination, that is, to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs imposed on her by the male-dominated society.

The modern women depicted by Shobha De do not depend, for their survival, on their fathers, husbands or sons. They are financially independent and have the required strength to face life with all its ups and downs. They are assertive, practical and strong. They fall into the category of New woman who solves her problems herself. As a writer of the woman-centred fiction De has worked for the complete emancipation of woman. She projects the ideas of liberating woman through self-realization. As a self-realized person, Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* opts for singlehood as a way of life. She refuses the offer of Girish and Ranbir and gets ready to live her life on her own terms by rejecting the idea of getting married second time. She is emancipated against the orthodox role of women and dominates her male counterparts. Karuna is the modern New Woman, who is independent in every way. She breaks out of the bonds of marriage and lands her feet firm into the profession of her choice that is modelling. Anjali and Ritu are also presented as liberated and emancipated New Women.

In fields such as familial, social, sexual and business, De's women revolt against the traditional image of Indian woman. They are sexually liberated and free-thinking women. Similarly, Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights* is a liberated woman who lives for her own pleasures and knows no moral codes and value system. Her lesbian experience with friend Linda implies independence from man. Shobha De also reinforces her plea for liberation through the example of Sudha, Aasha Rani's sister. Sudha lives with Amar without marriage. Here cohabitation, and not marriage seems to be the watchword for her. In the Indian tradition marriage is glorified as a holy union of man and woman. It is the turning point and the beginning of a new way of life.

However, in Shobha De's novels all these ideas regarding marriage are shattered by her modern liberated women. With marriage the other important issue that De's novels deal with is sex. Sex to her women is no longer a dreaded and despised thing. Her women enjoy a great deal of sexual freedom. In *Sisters*, through Mikki and Alisha, Shobha De shows how the concept of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a tremendous change. Mikki's encounters with different men help her to develop into an independent woman who at the cost of her individuality finally saves the Hiralal Industries.

Shobha De's women who are unmarried also appear to be expressing their need for sexual liberation. Alisha expresses the novelist's desire of liberation for women in sexual matters. Next, a middle-class working woman Taarini asserts her love for Shashi, despite her husband and children. Shobha De's women break all sorts of taboos and feel liberated. In *Strange Obsession*, an effort to free themselves completely from dependence on men, women like Meenakshi Iyengar indulge in lesbianism. Here, through the portrayal of Minx, De deconstructs the traditional concepts of love and sex. Shobha De's *Sultry Days* presents a group of modern women and throws a significant light on the change in the perspective of women. The women such as D'Lima, Lotika, Vimala, Manju, Chandni, Shona, Tanya, Zainab etc. break the established patriarchal norms by their deviant behaviour. Their action and assertions reveal that they are highly liberated young modern women. The world of *Snapshots* is a world entirely dominated by women. It is a world full of adventures of powerful, emancipated new women. The six women presented in the novel are empowered by their sexuality. They are urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women who transform themselves from 'commodities' to 'identities'. Marriage can no longer hold them down. Such women are Aparna, Rashmi and Reema. The novel *Second Thoughts* depicts Maya who is caught in a dilemma between her husband's conservatism and her desire for liberation. Finally, Shobha De also breaks the shackles of linguistic discipline by boldly employing highly objectionable language, thereby liberating the language from the male hegemony.

## Conclusion

Summarizes the argument and makes a list of findings deduced from the discussion of the varied world of subjugated, marginalized, rebellious, liberated and emancipated women characters in Shobha De's novels. Being a woman, De is more interested in the predicaments of women. She presents the vital reality and makes us aware of the miseries of women and injustices done to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society. However, it is an important fact that though De's novels are crowded with female characters, the analysis of the novels reveals her focus is only on the women protagonists, and the other secondary characters are simply mentioned. Furthermore, her novels move around only the metropolitan women whereas rural women do not find place in her novels. They are totally ignored.

Shobha De, restricts her characters to the urban area, ignoring the life of ordinary, illiterate and rural Indian women. As a staunch supporter and an ardent follower of feminism there is a bold and frank depiction of fair sex and feminine attitude in her works. Her novels are the protest novels against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom of expression and action. Everywhere they are curbed by many man-made norms and factors victimizing and subjugating them in several ways. As a result of their oppression, exploitation and marginalization, they turn rebellious. Next, through the depiction of warring pairs of women Shobha De brings out the psychological truth that woman is the enemy of the woman. Shobha De's novels represent the new Indian woman's voice. A 'New woman' is in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. The need for women to seek their identity is the message in her novels. However, De also exposes the women's misunderstanding regarding their freedom and mocks at their way of asserting their individuality by posing to be men without concentrating on female empowerment as a whole. Her women protagonists fail to understand that their sexual freedom is

being used and abused by men. The novelist also suggests that, whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously disregard morality, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. Though De has presented women who indulge in free sex, live fashionable and wealthy life, she in no way seems to support the way of life adopted by these so called modern women. On the contrary, she shows her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour. This can be deduced from the ultimate fate her heroines are condemned to as a result of their indulgence in unusual activities and deviant behaviour. In fact, Shoba De advises her women to analyse their behaviour and stop posing to be men.

Finally, though her novels are criticized for pornographic element, De is definitely a writer with a purpose. One cannot ignore her because she is the celebrity writer and has contributed in her own distinct way to Indian Novel in English. In the present scenario of gender discrimination, a study of these novels helps to widen and direct our thoughts to relevant problems affecting women in Indian society.

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