

SHOBHA DE'S COSMOS OF FEMININE CHARACTERS

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Abstract: Shobha De, a god gifted writer with unique ability to analyse even the most sensitive and psychological aspects of human life dexterously, comes to the fore in the field of fiction. She delineates the hidden inner cosmos of Indian women through her female characters. She introduces in her works both submissive and rebellious characters with a view to be comprehended their trials and tribulations under the tinge of tradition and hue of modernity. The impact of this alloy provides the vitality and pours the life into the characters to such extent as they seem to walk around us. In her works like *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, such feminine characters are portrayed at realistic foundation. They seem to shatter the good old image of women as an 'appendage' or an 'auxiliary'. It would not be exaggerated to assess that Shobha De entered into literary realm with a whiz bang.

Keywords: cosmos, feminine, novels, Shobha De.

Abstract: In present scenario, words like 'emancipation' and 'career' do not sound bizarre, sheepish and embarrassing while analysing feminine existence minutely. Women of today seem to believe –

Recognition is a must
for one's existence
otherwise in dust
shall go life's essence

The thought provoking new equations related to super charged gender conundrum are changing by leaps and bounds. To a great extent, its credit goes to the social reformers who endeavour to provide equal rights and freedom to women. In this reference, the motto and conceptions of the Western Feminist Movement are also consequential. These social phenomena heralded quite new era and galvanized Indian feminist writing. Consequently, a rich treasure of literature emerged concerning the gender issues like child marriage, female infanticide, polygamy, equality of women and man-woman relationship. De facto, literature contains paraphernalia of umpteen notions and views of intellectuals regarding contemporary social, cultural and moral concerns of the society. A wide analytical review clarifies that such passion of writing emerges spontaneously from the creative mind of Shobha De. She needs not to fumble the words to pour out the refined ideas in the oeuvre of her fictions and anthology. She declares herself in her anthology '*Shobha: Never a Dull De...*', "*The changes we were living through were so dramatic and radical they had to be squarely addressed sans moralistic judgements. I believed my job as a columnist was to reflect these changes and comment on the new contours of man-woman relationships.*" [1]

De's prime focus was the Indian women's traditional as well as modern viewpoints including all their penchants, anxieties, jovialities, failures and victories. She depicts her women's world

with intense sensitive touch. Sometimes she seems to search the solutions of the sufferings and afflictions of the female victims in her novels. Although she has to face a genuine storm that a fiery debate rages around her about her soft porn writings, she continues to touch the margin of higher human affairs. To her, *“In the era of gender equality, it is about time men got commodified and ‘sold’, just like women who have been packaged and hawked in the marketplace for centuries.”* [2] In fact, she is frank and broad-minded enough to describe mirror image of reality. She cannot resist herself from presenting the woman's spiritual, moral and even physical needs which are prohibited to be exposed in male dominating world. Madhumalati Adhikari observes a kind of dilemma in the mind of women novelists which tempt them to ponder and pour out spontaneous series of thoughts. She opines, *“Women's double marginalization through patriarchy and imperialistic, idealistic ideologies is a dominant point of reflection and discussion in all fictional works of women writers.”* [3] Shobha De's novels faces fumbling identity of female gender at its apex. She rejects the sexual discrimination and provides her women dignity and individuality which they justifiably deserve. She frankly motivates the modern women in her anthology, *“No matter how big or small the issue, the idea is to handle it well. To optimize; to do it with all your heart. Whenever I find myself feeling demotivated, I recall the slogan and get to the task with fresh enthusiasm. It helps that I love what I do. And that's the other thing -if you don't actively love your vocations, you will remain resentful and miserable, crippled by self doubt and waiting to opt out. So, make sure you identify that which you enjoy more than anything else- and success is bound to follow.”* [4] De has pumped this enthusiasm in her female protagonists of the novels. As a result, they are no longer the conventional victims, the subdued sex- ‘a figure of humility, neck bent eyes downcast.’ They seem to have the imprints of self- assertion and fumbling identity in their hypothalamus. The attempts to attenuate feminine potency particularly by male persons can be witnessed in almost all her novels. She appears to be blessed with the wider analytical dexterity in manifesting the ‘parlour state of women in the parochial society.’ Through her novels and essays, De has endeavoured to shatter the patriarchal hegemony in the Indian society that is adduced by Manu in the Manusmriti –

*Aswatantratah striyah karyah purushai swaidivarnisham
Vishyeshu cha sajjantyah sansthapyatmano vashe
pita rakshati kaumarya, bharta rakshati yuvane
putrah rakshati vardhkye, na stri svatantrayam arhati*

(Men should keep women in control every time and particularly concupiscent ladies. A woman is protected by her father in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and in old age she should be protected by her son. At no stage in life should a woman be left alone and destitute.)

Now the scenario is modulated in toto due to umpteen political and social ideologies and thus a new term ‘feminism’ was originated. The conversion in this respect can be summed up in Alice Jardine's words as follows, *“The putting into discourse of ‘women’ as that process diagnosed ... as intrinsic to modernity ; indeed the valorization of the feminine , woman and her obligatory ,that is obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking.”* [5] In De's first novel ‘Socialite Evenings’, Karuna, the protagonist is represented not as a victim but as a woman who just tries to know the utility of her being in this world. Throughout the life she remains in conflicting with her own persona. Ab initio, she is *“a problem child both at home and at school, she declines to dog the traditional path of etiquette and manners. At home, she refused to cower before elders and at school, she wore her sash hipster style. As she grows in age, there develops in her the emotional urge to identify with the outside world, the modern crowd, the bewitching and fascinating world of affluent girls who had everything .Her slap-dash entry into all that is modern lands her in the*

lewd and clandestine world of modelling with her secret assignment is the Terkosa Girl."[6] She feels her marital life as a ban because of the neutrality and an average attitude of her husband towards her. Conspicuously it is proved failure since there is a lacuna of understanding, maturity, love, joy and bliss. She boldly and rebelliously encounters it for she realizes, *"marriage is nothing to get excited and worried about. It is just something to get used to."*[7] She manifests her repulsion towards her husband and generalizes the aloof and cold-blooded outlook of the husbands who often kept themselves busy in lackluster, muted and repetitious activities. Here she seems to contradict the pervaded notions about womanhood and shatters the traditional position of women in social concerns as is instructed in the Manusmriti- *"Even though the husband be of bad character and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife..."*

And the similar idea is in the Bible-

"Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord."

Surprisingly, such instructions and compulsions are not meant for men. Only women are supposed to be pious, candid and restricted. Karuna analyses her pitiable and chaotic condition and utters her views about the meaningless marriage in which she is entangled, *"I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We have got nothing going... You don't have a clue what sort of woman I am. I am tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerisms the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into your overall scheme of things."*[8] She finds him unable to peep into her female 'self' and to placate her physical need. She expresses her grief, *"You never care to understand me as woman."*[9]

Like Shashi Deshpande, De does not let her female protagonist to be the victim of critical and adverse circumstances. Karuna knows well how to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. Though in the beginning, she performs the multiple duties of a housewife, a model, a society lady and an actor-writer and a paramour. But soon she becomes conscious of the futility of life and repents for the 'aimless days' indefinitely repeated. As a result, Karuna liberates herself from the shackles of social system and activates the creative impulse stifled within her. She transforms her intellectual afflictions and moral sufferings into creative doctrine of art and beauty. She becomes the embodiment of power syndrome (*Shakti*) and ultimately with that desire for life (*Jivisha*), she turns topsy-turvy into positivities against the predatory male-dominated world. She relishes her unfurled individual self and finds a niche in her life. A new generation of 'wild', 'lusty' and 'wandering' woman like those of De's female protagonists will *'prefer to identify themselves as radical lesbian feminist separatists.'* [10]

Karuna remains indelible character in our mind by adopting middle path at last where she provides her 'self' recognition and performs her responsibilities as a daughter. Anjali also takes shelter in celestial surroundings after being disillusioned initially.

In most of her novels, Shobha De reaches at culmination of female boldness and frankness in the matter of parading sexuality. They relish the illicit relationships outside marriage. If we observe minutely, De's intention is not to westernize and demolish the culture of Indian women and make them open to cater male dominant society rather she endeavours to establish the norms of equality between man and woman. Her female characters appear to borrow this attitude from the male world and want to exhibit that they can also be liberal to lead their lives according to their own style. They can be immoral and irresponsible like them. De facto, this is considered the only ladder of success for them. *"They keep a string of men tied*

under their belts, so that when one fails to live up to their expectations they can move onto the next one.” [11]

Having dexterity in journalism, modelling and artistic caliber, Shobha De can peep into the inner aspect of characters with quite sensitive delicacy. She portrays the persona of her heroine Asha Rani in ‘*Starring Nights*’ with the brushes of lesbianism and heterosexuality, and the colours of umpteen aspects of womanhood at the canvas of sex-starved society. In this novel, we come across with various representatives of new women-Malini-the wife of Akshay, Linda-a lesbian journalist, Amma- a pimp mother and Asha Rani- a rising porn actress. De, in a way, endeavours to manifest the bitter and hidden truth of bollywood that casting couch works wonder in the industry. Asha Rani, a product of a small town, is led by circumstances to pompous and showy world of film industry. Soon she assumes an attitude of contented carnality and becomes amenable to debauched lifestyle with producers, directors, heroes cameramen and high society celebrities. Later on, this lifestyle becomes analgesic for her though she regrets for her fall from innocence to the guilty maturity and develops aversion particularly for male society. She wishes to seek vengeance on them and cries, “*All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to them what they try to me. I will screw you all-beat you at your own game.*” [12] Unfortunately, she creates a tragic and hellish atmosphere for herself in doing so. She is trapped by sex-starved male society at every step of her life. She concludes that, “*Whichever one looked at it, there was always a man in the picture. A man using abusing and finally discarding a woman.*” [13] Linda, her journalist friendly takes initiative to provide her special care, love, favour, security and comfort which leads their relation to the verge of lesbianism. She accepts the superiority of lesbian pleasures to heterosexual, “*Yes, she thought, this is what it should be tender, beautiful and erotic. In a way, it could never be with a man.*” [14] De facto, it proves an emotional oasis to her. When she reaches at the apex of her fame, her moral disaster automatically begins. She gets acquainted with the shattering human values of the glittering world of cine-stars. As Asha Rani is a creation of Shobha De’s literary cosmos, she erases suicidal attitude from her life and vitalizes herself with bold and stern decisions to survive in the same society. She emerges as a purified gem from the rubbish past with more enthusiasm and robust optimism for the future along with her daughter Sasha. As a crux of matter, Shobha De seems true to her craft and her cosmos of feminine characters tempts the readers feel and experience and not just read it.

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