Chapter III

MODERN THEMATIC PATTERNS

The life of Cosmopolitan city and its various dimensions have been captured by Shobha De and she puts it to visualizethe readersthrough her writings of novel. After the British rule, man’s life has changed a lot of and everyone has started to think on his own and try to stand on his own leg. Man has become matured in all the walks of his life as said by Howard H.Frederick as follows,

“The Human being should be considered the primary objective in a political War. And the human being has the most critical point in his mind.Once his mind has been reached, the political animal has been decapitated without receiving bullets”.(123)

De belongs to one of the most critical period when qualitative change take place in the society among the people of South-East Asia. She has envisioned the unavoidable shift in the lives of the people. They do want to follow the rules and regulations that has been imposed on them through unacceptable conventions. Even before a long back R.K.Narayan hinted the same view in his novel The Bachelor of Arts. Chandran strongly reacts against
the imposition of such customs and traditions in vibrant manner. He wants to live according to his own choice:

Why should we be cudgeled and nose-led by our elders. Why cannot we be allowed to arrange our life as we please. Why cannot they leave as to rise or sink on our own ideal. (71)

De is much concerned with the modern aspect of “life”. Her novels *Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sisters, Sultry Days,* and *Second Thoughts* have multi thematic patterns. In her Novels, she projects not only one or two themes but also much concerned to project many thematic patterns altogether. She is highly aware of the critical condition of woman in the world of romance, charm, music, film, glamour, modeling, etc. Her main themes are pin-pointed towards her various approaches for the portrayal of woman in different contexts. There is a sense of urgency, rebelliousness, anger, hatred and dissatisfaction against the maltreatment of woman in her fiction. Her novels deal with the theme of family, marriage, divorce, strangeness in human relations, complicated and complex way of modern life led by people living in cosmopolitan cities, effect of glamour, the complex world of Bollywood, career in modeling and corporate world. All her novels deal with such themes with required frankness and seriousness. About the various thematic patterns and the projection of the variety of subjects in Shobha De’s novels,
Paul W. Roberts Says, "A good writer, enigmatic, straightforward, crude, erudite, girlish, wise".

De is highly conscious about the modern circumstances which make inevitable change in life especially after 1980. After 1980, India has tested the choice of glamorization, fast-growing ambition, to become something extraordinary and above all feel comfortable in adopting free style living, the world of fashion, passion, ambition, attraction has attracted Shobha de too much. That is why, she is highly obsessed by the horror of sex and wealth’ in her novels. She has viewed life from the women’s perspective. She amply throws lights on the imposed limitation of women in our society. She also highlights how woman has to suffer a lot, due to the cultural limitations and unacceptable unorthodox social values. Almost all her novels show a strong sense of hatred and anger towards such devastating and domineering attitude of male dominated society. De highly devotes herself in exposing the exploitation of women in the hands of men, the futility of marriage in modern circumstance, increasing cases of divorce, plea for the independence of woman in each and every sphere of life, the delineation of various kinds of human relationships, especially lesbianism which is occurring frequently and her hatred against the double-standard and paradoxical behavior of the people against the advancement of women in fast-growing and fast-changing world.
of glamour. She voices that women are not inferior to their counterparts in terms of anything. For instance, she writes in her novel Sisters, “Women play for very high stakes and are driven by ambition, lust, greed and hate”. *(Sisters 82)*

Shobha De's selection of the social milieu of cosmopolitan city Mumbai equally adds charm and fascination to her novels. She is much concerned with the presentation of lives of the high profile people who belong to 'socialite milieu.' She does take interest in presenting the luxurious life-style of the Bollywood. Her depiction of Bollywood and Shimla is not imaginative like the 'Malgudi' of R. K. Narayan or 'Wessex' of Thomas Hardy or 'a little bit ivory of Jane Austen. Whatever happens in Mumbai does not happen everywhere in India as it occurs into the case of R. K. Narayan's 'Malgudi'. R. K. Narayan's Malgudi represents the entire India in terms of social, political and economic realities. Shobha De's milieu in Mumbai or Shimla represents only a selective range in which socialite or high-profile aristocratic world of stars or superstars or model or corporate people are presented with shrewd observations. The writer herself belongs to the same class that is why she feels more comfort in revealing the piggeries, oddities, obscurities and complicities of such classes. She is herself a well known model and a
scriptwriter of good name and fame. It is a reason that she successfully dives deep into human emotions and passions of so-called city people.

Shobha De’s novels have dealt with some popular themes related to the problems which occurred in the life of women in the age of transformation. She realizes the importance of mere independence in the life of women, because women have to play a very big and important role in the building of nation. Women should not be only entitled to beget children rather they should be given equal treatment in relation to man. Shobha De does not take interest to present the traditional aspects of women related to Indian myths in general. She criticizes the Sati-Savitri model of women featured in Indian myths, TV serials or documentary. For instance, she writes in one of her well-known essays:

Putting the Sati-Savitri act together in our confined times been a cake-walk. Plus, who really wants to prove her untainted character to a boring Rama, when there might be a devastating Ravana around? (111)

De handles the theme of pativrata in very critical manner. She says, that it is the sense of pativrata which makes Indian women slave to their husbands. She has given the instance of Sati and Sita who sacrificed their lives for the
sake of their respective husbands Lord Shankar and Lord Ram. But Sati and Sita are the representatives of the sacrifice for the sake of \textit{pativrata}. She is also very critical about the ‘sati-pratha’ in which a widow sacrifices her own life to burn herself alive. This sati-pratha was prevalent in India till 1830. Shobha De also criticizes the suffering of women in the hands of men for the sake of the continuation of tradition.

De does not handle any myth in the delineation of new women. Her presentation of new women is highly characterized by his vision of modernity in the new era in which there is no wall on the division between men and women. Her women cannot be equated with Sita or Sati in any respect. Aasha Rani, Meenakshi, Nisha, etc., are the women who are not the playing in the hands of man rather they feel proud by selling their emotions and passions of man intentionally. In \textit{Socialite Evenings}, for instance, the naked body of Nisha is viewed as it was an object of otherness or depersonalizing reification:

Nisha’s ‘prefect’ body- I must admit it looked pretty grotesque to me, with bulbous breasts and a small ass. If there was one feature that was indeed prefect- it was her navel. But, as she sardonically pointed out to me. It is cute, year. But what use is it to me? She had a point. (\textit{SE} 105)
The theme of the exploitation of women in the hands of man is one of the most prominent issues in her novels. In her novels like—*Socialite Evenings, Starry nights, Sultry Days, Sisters, and Second Thoughts*, there is one common thing – the ‘separation’ of women emotionally, physically and economically. Shobha De seems to be highly critical about suffering and exploitation of women all the time. She explores various circumstances in which women are bound to stoop before the demands of women. These women suffer a lot because they think they are destined to do so. In *Socialite Evenings*, the life of Karuna is quite similar. In the beginning, she is quite devotional, quite submissive towards her passive and docile husband but there is no question of love between them. In her relationship with her husband, Shobha De attempts to portray her feminine characteristics. She shows that Karuna has no choice in the beginning but when she realizes the importance of her own self, she becomes extremely terrified. There is complete emotional void between Karuna and her husband. There is a sense of emotional bankruptcy between them. These misunderstandings lead her to establish an affair with another man Girish. In the beginning, she considers this act as sin. But gradually, she accommodates herself in new circumstances. She is happy to express without any hesitation, her sexual urge for a man other than her husband, even to her husband. She exploits the passiveness of her husband.
Here it appears that Karuna has just a formal relationship with her husband. There is no intimacy, no mutual understanding, no mutual respect, and no mutual devotion for each other. She does not hesitate to declare her intention to sit in the laps of other man:

I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him in Venice. There is a good chance that I will feel thoroughly disillusions after that. Maybe he will have some truly foul personal habits will disenchant me. In which case it will really be *A Death in Venice?* (SE 186)

The change in the attitude of Karuna is equated with her past sufferings due to the passiveness and exploitation by her husband, Karuna’s humorously sarcastic approach to her problems in the patriarchal male culture apparently deconstructs the traditional gender hostility used to elaborate the polarities of connubial ties. Karuna decides to react against male-superiority. She loathes her husband’s dwelling in post-mortems. She expresses her urge through love:

You know by now that I am not the flighty sort. I don’t flirt at random like my other friends. I am steady and grounded. It’s the Taurean in me that’s surfacing these days. Treat this as a short-term mania that will wear itself out. (SE 186)
Karuna plays different roles at different times. Locked up in a fragile and futile marital knot, Karuna led a life that was full of emotional frigidity and sentimental breakdown. There was no meaningful communication between her and her husband. There is no question of smiles, laughs as no change of ideas and thoughts. Her situation is extremely painful because of unhealthy attitude shown by her husband. She admits the facts time and again, “It wasn’t that I never tried, but there was no question that my husband and I inhabited different planets”. (SE 68)

In spite of these trivial events occurred in Karuna’s life from time to time, she tried her best to run on track. She was ready to fulfill the traditional demands of a housewife. She did not protest, but she intentionally obeyed her husband. The house was kept in order. Her husband is a compromising and well-understanding man. Even he is not interested in his wife’s affair with Girish:

I have thought over the whole thing carefully. I would have thrown you right now—but I am prepared to give you one more chance. I am not a mean man. You have been a good wife— I am prepared to cancel this one black mark on your performance record and start with a clean state, but you have to swear you will never see or keep in touch with that man
again. You have sinned but I must be generous and forgive you. (SE 184)

Here we find a drastic change in the attitude of a man, who is ready to forgive his wife even knowing the fact that his wife is entangled with someone else. It means that the husband like him has realized the outcome of change in modern society and now he is willingly ready to compromise with his wife this act. He realizes the fact also, that Karuna might be attached to Girish in order to fulfill her psychological and emotional need. Karuna always shows her emotional void and psychological breakdown. Basically she is pure and she is quite similar to an ideal housewife. S.P. Swain remarks:

Basically Karuna is pure, for she is spiritually untainted and unsullied. The modern New Woman, independent in all respects, Karuna is a respectable, conservative Hindu housewife, wrapped in yards and sari. The role of a wife restricts a women’s self-development.(134)

Women play their role seldom. Women are the symbol of love, affection and sacrifice. They bear the burden of many relationships and at the same time they have to play the role of a daughter, a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law, etc. They should not be subordinated to the level of animals.
It is quite peculiar that when they become active, they go beyond man’s reach. Rosemarie Tong writes:

Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have top in order to survive psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing. (200)

Like any woman in our fast changing society, Karuna plays different roles. She is a successful model, a society lady but she is an unsuccessful housewife. Marriages in her case no scope. She thinks that marriage subjugates and enslaves woman. Like other married women who have practically no choice left to them, what their husband’s will and desire, Karuna has independent thought. She develops her own life style on own ego, which are necessary for the survival of her identity and dignity. She is not slavishly tagged to tradition. In her case we do not find the marginalization of women. Shobha De transforms Karuna into a creative principle of art and beauty.

The suffering of Karuna symbolizes the polarity between activity and passivity but when they become active, the activeness of men is drowned. Helen Cixous observes rightly:
A male privilege can be in the opposition between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same oppositions: activity/passivity. Either the woman is passive, or she does not exist. What is left unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the opposition; she is not coupled with the father who is coupled with the son. (288)

In this novel, Shobha De beautifully presents the effect of unhealthy relationship between the husband and the wife. In her novel, marriage had been taken in different perspectives. Marriage is not made in heaven as the modern people conceive. Modern people regard marriage is only a sort of economic bond of living. Anjali, who is the narrator, throws off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rises to the social status of the upper class. She is of the views that marriage should be made by choice and not by chance or pressure. A woman in Indian society marries not just the man but also with entire family and entire responsibilities. Once a girl becomes married, she loses her freedom, free-wandering and free-thoughts. Such is in the case of Karuna herself. She is the representative of Shobha De’s new women and that is why she detests her husband’s flattering nature, her duplicity and deviousness. She remarks about the changing attitude of Indian women in these words:
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 under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation. (SE 69)

Shobha De in *Socialite Evenings* has presented the theme of marriage and family in a very critical manner. She is of the view that the concept of marriage is changing day by day due to inevitable modern circumstances; Marriage is no more a matter of chance. It has become a matter of choice in the aristocratic and high profile metropolitan culture. The concept of marriage is related with concept of family because both are reciprocal to each other. Family cannot exist without marriage. In spite of its biological feature, it unites two separate human beings altogether to live under the same roof and share each and everything whatever comes in their way. There is a great significance assigned to family. Alexander Walker, a well known social critic, observes the importance of marriage in these words:

The advantages resulting from the states of marriage are that the two sexes may reciprocally satisfy the natural desires which are felt equally by each...that they equally submit the exercise of the reproductive organs to a healthful regularity; that they may equally perpetuate duties provide for the children proceeding
from their mutual union; that they may equally assist each other throughout life by reciprocal affection and cares; that they may in old age receive the cares of their common progeny; and that they may, in health and well being, reach that age which all these circumstances generally enable married pairs to attain. (78)

Alexander Walker has assigned a great significance to marriage. He is of view that it is marriage which separates human beings from that of animals. There is no question of marriage in the world of animals. The journey of animals is free from taboos. Animals enjoy and fulfill their physical compulsions without any sense of morality. They are not attached to each other as the intermingling of two emotions, two souls, two minds, etc. David McReynolds does not write critically, “Nor can a person find his identity in the family— for that institution is breaking up”. (203)

_Socialite Evenings_ presents a picture of institution of marriage obtaining in the rich and aristocratic class of Indian society. Her presentation is authentic, natural and minute because she herself belongs to that class and she herself has bitter experience of such kind. She tries her best to show how family system in India is crumbling and how marriage has become no more a matter of continuation in modern circumstances. The new definition of marriage is prevalent because there is devoid of emotion, mutual
understanding, mutual devotion, respect for each other and existence of social and sentimental satisfaction. Anjali, the friend of Karuna typifies the concepts of marriage prevailing in the rich, aristocratic and high profile Indian society. The dubious factors instrumental in her marriage set the tone of other marriages in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Anjali is not interested in study and she wants to get rid of her middle class background. She is pretty, beautiful, young girl, vibrant and extrovert in approach. She loves to enjoy in seeking new places and meeting new people. She joined Air India as a hostess because this job rightly suits to her beauty and talent. Abe Tyabjee rightly observes:

Experienced rake with a wild reputation. Something about Anjali’s almost frigid demeanour had attracted him. Initially, he had imagined she would be just another quick pick-up. But, by the time they landed in London, Anjali had managed to hook Abe. Or he her. (SE 12)

They fall in love and overlap the physical boundary without any hesitation. Marriage in their case is not the matter of emotional attachment but sexual satisfaction. Anjali and Abe Tyabjee are both involved with some other persons. They do not hesitate to fulfil their physical urge with other people with whom so. Marriage has no social and moral significance for
them. Anjali announces her next affair and when she talks about her next affair to Karuna, Karuan has become stunned. Karuna says, “She was in love again but this time she managed to stun me”. (SE 95)

But Anjali is not in the mood of remorse. To change a man for sexual gratification seems to be habit. She talks to Karuna without any senses of guilt:

“This is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me. What Karan and I share is a very tender and beautiful relationship”. (SE 95)

After her divorce from Abe Tyabjee, Anjali is so desperately looking for another person for marriage. She would like to grab rich person this time. Anjali does get rich man in the form of Kumar. Kumar has also divorced his second wife in order to get married to Anjali. But it is most ironical that Kumar is a gay and involved with Murthy turns to spiritualism. There is a great transformation in her character and attitude towards life. In the state of frustration, depression, boredom and anxiety she is transformed into a religious minded devotee who now hates sex.

The fate of other marriages is not much different from the two marriages of Anjali. Karuna’s sister gets divorced from her engineer husband in England and lives alone. Karuna, herself, restrained by her middle-class
background and morality for some time, breaks loose of the martial bond and establishes relationship with husband’s friend Krish, who is a married man. Karuna is conscious of the fact that she is committing adultery. But she continues to plunge deeper into it with feelings of revolt against the husband. She frequently goes to Krish’s hotel for the sexual fulfillment. When her friend Ritu puts a question whether she is going to marry Krish, Karuna says, “I don’t know. I don’t care. I want him. I shall go crazy”. (SE173)

The case of Karuna is not different from the case of Anjali. Karuna is interested in ending her marriage with Krish. Karuna leaves India and goes to London in order to spend sometime with her sister there. But in London her affair is exposed and her husband suddenly lands there to thrash things out with her. She does not only feel ashamed of the betrayal against her husband, but adopts a fabricated stance about her intended trip to Rome also. Her husband shows his politeness and prepares herself to forget everything. Anjali rightly comments on the attitude of Karuna towards her husband, “Your little infidelity whatever it was and with whosoever is so trivial”. (SE224)

Ritu’s case is not quite different also. Ritu loves the thrashings she receives from her husband. After sometimes her marriage goes haywire because she was bitten by the love bug. She falls in love with Gul—a shady character in Bombay who is rolling his hands in the worlds of wealth. She
easily bends before his demands. She says, “Gul is the best thing that could have happened to me”. (SE206)

Ritu’s relationship with Gul lacks the real emotional attachment. Gul treats Ritu as a whore. Gul also provides his friends the body of Ritu. Ritu jumps into the world of crime and drugs. She herself began to consume drugs. She turns into a high profile prostitute who has a number of lovers but no husband. Having highly tortured and suffered from mental and physical harassment, she returns to her husband who is ready to accept sexually, physically and mentally wrecked wife. His appreciation of Ritu is somewhat highly imaginative because the traditional and conventional Indian husbands are not able to ready to accept such wives, who are totally deprived of high morality and social values.

Shobha De has also presented the problems of the middle class families in the changing circumstances in the metropolitan cities. It is the destiny of middle class people to be very strict and orthodox in following moral values and social norms especially in maintaining human relationships. In *Socialite Evenings*, Shobha De shows the ‘hollowness’ of such human relationships which are based on ostensibility of social and moral values. Human relationships should be based on the demand of time, space and location. For instance, the family of Karuna which represents the middle-class
family suffers too much. The parents of Karuna are totally anxious to observe moral values. Marriage for them is the bedrock of faithfulness, fidelity and mutual support. They exemplify the traditional Hindu view of marriage according to which husband and wife should maintain the mutual fidelity till death. Husband and wife observe strict rules because they are symbols of Ram and Sita for everyone. But on the contrary all these three daughters are facing the same problem. Alka has lost her mental balance because of their emotional and sentimental breakdown. Their other two daughters have broken their tie with their husbands and now they are divorced. Subhash Chandra rightly writes about the pathetic conditions of Karuna’s parents:

All of their three daughters are facing problems. Alka has lost her mental balance and is admitted in the nursing home. The other two daughters have become divorce. But they weather these back-breaking and nerve-racking crises (of course these have taken their toll in terms of their withdrawal from the hectic social life) primarily because they have continued to stand by each other. (147)

Thus Karuna, Swati and Alka suffer from the same problems. Among the three sisters, Karuna’s problem is multiple. Karuna’s pregnancy is supposed to be the greatest crisis in her life. Here expected child creates a
multiple problems in her life because the child’s arrival will put many questions before her. But she begets girl child and names her Shirinne. She hires a nanny Savitri who looks after Shirinne all the time. Karuna succeeds in overstepping all the difficulties by adopting the attitude of so called modern new woman who is independent in every way. Her changing behavior is the symbol of her transformation from ‘innocence to experience’ or from ‘ignorance to knowledge’. Her struggle to cope with many difficulties is the symbol of her victory over the male dominated society; even she does not hesitate to adopt fault means. She wants to get success in life by applying various tools and those tools are foul or fair, it does not matter for her. She is the representative of various women in our society who succumbs to the mal-intentions of malist culture or male-dominated society. The final comments of Ranbir who is a journalist on the character of Karuna, is quite remarkable. He says about her, “You are now disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient”.(SE305)

Thus the theme of exploitation and suffering, marriage, divorce, independence of women in every step of life, occurring strangeness in human relationships and the publicity of woman in various public and private sectors are supposed to be discussed in this novel with required frankness and shrewd observation. Shobha De does so because of her sympathetic consideration
towards the characters of Karuna, Alka, Swati, Ritu and Anjali. Certainly in many ways they are the epitome of new women emerging, especially in metropolitan culture.

Her novel *Starry Nights* contains almost the same view of Shobha De, which have been discussed in *Socialite Evenings*. It seems to be the continuation of earlier novel in many respects. *Starry Nights* is a faithful portrayal of the double standard, paradoxical behavior of the Bollywood. Gita Barua rightly remarks about the thematic patterns of Starry in these words:

The novel (Starry Nights) is also a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, glamour, crimes, lies and deceits and sexual exploitation. Since Shobha De the novelist has been long associated with the Bombay film world as a journalist, she knows it first hand and has been able to portray it well.(174)

*Starry Nights* is the story of a nymphomaniac character Aasha Rani, who is supposed to be the continuation of the portrayal of Karuna in many respects. There is only one difference – Karuna has been portrayed from Indian tradition while in the portrayal of Aasha Rani, Shobha De has ignored the traditional, social and moral values associated with Indian womanhood. She frankly presents a woman who faces multiple problems when she comes
out from the narrow domestic walls. That is why it is a sensational story of a woman, who struggles hard to survive in the sex starved society. Certainly, *Starry Nights* shows the sexual exploitation of a woman who is eager to live outside her house and would like to locate herself in the mainstream of life.

*Starry Nights* portrays some of the harsh realities of Indian aristocratic society in which social and moral values are viewed from different angles. In the fast-growing and fast-changing social norms and values, it is quite difficult for the people to stick themselves towards a set value of morality. The novel paints the women character like Aasha, who are the victims of their own aspirations and ambitions. Their passionate ambition in the world of ostensibility always locates them in the context of inevitable suffering in the form of different kind of exploitation. Aasha Rani is the unparalleled beauty of the Bollywood. She has easily become the victim of some of the important traits of Bollywood. Her journey in Bollywood symbolizes her transformation from an innocent girl to a highly paid girl who doesn’t hesitate to sell her body for the sake of name and fame. Her relationship with producers, directors, actors, heroes, cameramen, high profile celebrities and other non-filmy people has put her in a strange world where there is no place of emotion, sentiment, moral and social values.

Sandhyarani Dash introduced Aasha Rani in these appropriate words:
Aasha Rani, the unrivalled, ravishing beauty of Bombay stardom, is a woman with an insatiable libido, thus susceptible to indiscriminate sex with film people – producers, directors, actors, heroes, cameramen, high profile celebrities and other non-filmy people sheaths and other non-filmy people also – everywhere used, soiled and exploited.(167)

Suffering, anxiety, depression and bewilderment can be noticed in the life of Aasha Rani from the very early age. When she was only fifteen years old, her own mother uses her in order to get money. Her own mother always forces her to become the bed-mate of the producers, distributors, actors and cameramen. She uses her daughter in blue film in order to earn more and more money. She is such a docile and heinous mother that she does not hesitate to sell the body, emotion and beauty of her own daughter to the people, who might bring benefit in her business. Aasha Rani becomes the source of attraction for the Bollywood people even in very young age. She is highly sentimental and emotional regarding the ill treatment which her mother receives from her father. She is the silent witness of the suffering of her mother who is herself the victim of male world. She has minutely seen the journey of her mother in the world of sex and obsession. That is why she does not deny the request of her mother to become the bed-mate of several high
profile people. A strange sense of obsession towards exploitation is visible in her approach towards life:

Perhaps it had something to do with Appa and the way he had mistreated her mother. Or maybe she felt soiled, used, exploited by them – she often told him bitterly: All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all – beat you at your own game. (SN-8)

There is a strong sense of hatred in Aasha Rani’s heart against the male dominated society. She has an experience of the rape by her own uncle. She is the victim of nightmare, when she remembers the sexual assault made by her own uncle when she was only fifteen years old. In that rape, she does not find an opportunity even to scream. Shobha De here presents the theme of exploitation of a teen age girl in the form of sexual harassment and rape. Shobha De writes:

She remembered queuing up outside the enormous tent with this man holding her hand. Soon her hand had been slyly slipped into his mind and his hand been replaced by what feel like a firm hard stick. Asha Rani wanted to scream. But she
was terrified. Finally, he had turned limp and she had felt her small hand go damp with something sticky and smelly. ((SN 196)

In India, women have to suffer more than men because of their poor fate rather imposed upon them by orthodoxy and double standard of the society itself. But there is a difference in the suffering of the women in the city from the village. In India, city is quite different from the villages. Village society is more hard and traditional in preserving strict rules and regulations for the continuation of moral values and cultural outlook. They can sacrifice their lives for the sake of those so-called moral and social values. But in the city or in the metropolitan culture, gradually, a sense of violation towards moral values and ethics can be noticed. There is a fast-growing and fast-changing scenario especially in the field of the development of women in towns and cities. But here one thing is lacking. Development or empowerment on account of normal degradation cannot be accepted. The situation is even worse in the metros because it has been observed and noticed time and again that a large number of cases of molestation and child-rape occurred. These cases occur because of many reasons. Some cases and self-framed and self-oriented as it happens, in the case of Aasha Rani. When she crosses her thirteen or fourteen springs, she is being involved in the art of
sexuality. Her mother wants to make her a superstar in the world of Bollywood and that is why she does not feel any kind of shame in selling the body of her teen-aged daughter to the producers, actors, distributors, directors and high profile people for the sake of money and stardom. Her mother is the representative of all those mothers who are the victims of passionate ambition. They conceive their daughters as the certain tools of success. Aasha Rani’s childhood has been spent in poverty and starvation. She is the witness of her mother’s involvement in the world of lust and love. She does not want to suffer like her mother and that is why the cruel dream of her mother has been silently but successfully realized by Aasha Rani. Sandhyarani Dash rightly comments on the paradoxical situation of Aasha Rani who battles hard to survive herself in the dual nature of her own character caused by the various paradoxes of city life:

An incomplete childhood with a single parent, poverty, starvation, her mother’s cruel dream to make her a film star, the devilish attitude of the people of the stardom to bruise and better her femininity, the jealousy and unkindness of her sister sudha, the collapse of her marital life and separation from her own child—she stoically endures a series of shocks one after another.(168)
Here we find gradual flights in the character of Aasha Rani. Here one question also arises – is there no way than this to survive in this world by accepting the needs and demands of the people by selling their bodies in order to fulfil their emotion? There can be several alternatives in the life of Aasha Rani but her selection of her career in Bollywood reveals her dormant passion to become a woman of name and fame. Her suffering in high profile society itself tells her situation of her success and failure in this highly imaginative world. Her exploitation symbolizes the exploitation of so many girls who do not hesitate to sell their morality in order to become film stars. Aasha Rani was given a chance by Kishenbhai. He taught her the first lessons of Bollywood how to surrender each and everything to become a successful film star. She learns the first bitter truth by surrendering her before Kishenbhai who does not hesitate to establish sexual relationship with her many times. Here, Shobha De presents how an innocent child like Viji surrenders herself before the agonizing demand of kishenbhai. In the course of her first sexual relationship with Kishenbhai, she experiences the bitter truth of life. But her innocent eyes are very reflexive and full of tears:

“Are not you afraid?” he had asked. “No, not at all. Why should I be?” Those eyes had regarded him coolly and he had wondered briefly if she was as innocent as she looked. (SN 5)
Aasha Rani’s exploitation in the hands of Kishenbhai is agonizing and depressing because it brings mental repulsion in her life. She easily succumbs to the ugly demands made by Kishenbhai because her first experiences always haunt her memory how she and her mother suffered a lot because of the apathy shown by her own father. Here there can be two possible explanations to her surrender. First, there may be her sexual passion and second there may be her past anger and suffering which compels her to jump in the world of sex and wonder. But the second reason is more apt and suitable because she always remembered the hardships, she suffered in the past. She reveals her sad story to Kishenbhai without any ironical detachment:

“You don’t know about my childhood,” she had tell him hugging a doll. “I had never anything to play with –no toys nothing ‘”. He had heard the story before. The father who had deserted them. The mother who had been left with three children to raise. The poverty, deprivation. Her struggle. (SN4)

Aasha Rani becomes a successful film star by involving herself in blue films. She realizes the fact very soon. She tells her mother about her shyness and shameless in involving herself in the blue films. But her mother consoles her by revealing the fact that blue films are not shown in the theatres. Her
mother’s words are the futile consolation to Aasha Rani who is now in the state of horror and terror. Her mother tells:

“Don’t be stupid. These films will not be shown in the theatres. Nobody will know you have done them. There is lot of money involved. I have committed on your behalf. (SN 53)

Aasha Rani does not want to take off her clothes in front of the cameramen. She is quite hesitant but at this time her mother tries her best to teach the lesson of living in the world of film industry. Her mother tells her it is not surprising because even she has to do this thing when she has to be examined by a doctor. But can be the examined of a doctor of the naked body is compared with acting nakedly without any shyness and shame in the blue films? Here the words of Amma are quite surprising:

Think of it like going to the doctor’s. Don’t you allow him to examine your body? These people are the same. They see bodies all the time. It does not make any difference. (SN 53)

Here we find Amma is the kind of mother who, in spite of saving her own daughter from such devilish world, throws her into that domineering world without any remorse and sense of guilt. She further gives a logical explanation to her daughter to become naked before the strangers:
It is all acting. You just pretend and follow the doctor’s order. Close your eyes and thing of other things. Think of your poor sister and Amma struggling to make your big star. Do you know Sudha has not paid her fees? (SN 53)

In her course of struggle, Aasha Rani not only suffers from sexual harassment but also from a mental shock she receives in the cause of contemplation all the time. She although sells her chastity and morality but she is not satisfied with type of life in which she has become a high profile whore. In Bombay she has come in contact with Seth Amirchand who is the Member of Parliament. Seth Amirchand has beneficiary image in the society. He has been considered as the Godfather of the downtrodden, underdogs, underprivileged and weaker section of the society. When Aasha Rani comes in contact with Seth Amirchand, Amirchand began to takes special interest in her. He discovers that Asha Rani has a lot of potential because, she is not only emotional but she is not knowledgeable. Under his paternal roof, she gets the status of an emerging star in the filmy world.

On the other hand, she has come in contact with Akshay Arora who is the master of making films. He takes deep interest in her from his first film with Asha Rani. He exploits the condition of Aasha Rani. He is a definite kind of man bastard whose eyes are often fixed on the beauty of women. He
always runs after the woman by applying different tricks and magic and Aasha Rani becomes the victim of his sexual romantic charm and fascination. Shobha De says Akshay Arora:

Every woman in the audience believed, he was doing it to her and her alone. While every man thought he was Akshay-screwing the women of the worlds? (SN 39)

Here, Shobha De has beautifully projected the theme of human relationship in the modern age. She shows how human relationship are being distorted and deformed in the age of cultural ‘transformation and dislocation’ in which distortion and deformity are visible everywhere. The relationships between Aasha Rani and Akshay Arora is such a relationship in which there is only passion, fasion, fascination, attraction but there is lack of understanding, morality and ethics. Akshay Arora is already a married man but his relationship with her wife Malini is not healthy. Malini directly curses Aasha Rani for the breakage of her marriage with Akshay. When the relationship between Aasha Rani and Akshay Arora is on climax, Aasha Rani proposes to marry but on the other hand Akshay Arora does not want to marry her by changing his own religion. Here Aasha Rani’s presentation is quite evident. Sandhyarani Dash appropriately comments on the pathetic and humiliating condition of Aasha Rani in these words:
Aasha Rani has to suffer a lot due to this relationship. She is humiliated, insulted and rebuked by Akshay’s wife Malini who curses her for trying to break her marriage. She is even beaten by Akshay later on. Her next meeting with him ends not agree to change his religion, become a Muslim and marry her. Frustrated, betrayed and humiliated, she tries to commit suicide but fortunately escapes death. (170)

Shobha De is very critical of the role of media. She is of the view that how media encroaches in the private life of the film stars, politicians and corporate world. The role and function of media and the journalists have totally been altered. They take interest not in positive views. These journalists take more interest in the assassination of character belonging to high profile society. They exploit high profile people and blackmail them in order to flourish their ‘yellow journalism’. In Starry Nights, Aasha Rani’s own friend Linda who is a journalist and knows each and every secret of Aasha Rani’s life does not hesitate to reveal the entire story in her journal. Sandhyarani Dash critically comments on the role of Linda as a journalist in the life of Aasha Rani:
Aasha Rani’s journalist friend Linda who knew all her Secrets betrays her by revealing the secrets which comes as a terrible blow to her. (170)

After breaking her relationship from Akshay Arora she comes in contact with another high profile male – Abhijit. Abhijit began to take interest in Aasha Rani’s life although he has a beautiful fiancée Nikita. Aasha Rani’s relationship with Abhijit is totally erotic and sensual. When Aasha Rani learns the story of Abhijit and Nikita through the interview of Nikita published in a magazine, she becomes full of hatred and introspection. She believes the fact that Abhijit has established relationship with her only in order to fulfil his erotic and sexual desires. There is no sense of consolation, devotion and understanding. Abhijit uses her body in order to satisfy his emotional urge. This fact has been realized by Aasha Rani and she tells Abhijit directly:

You are not making love to me! You are screwing my own image – my screen image. Gate out of here, Abhijit go back to your wife and make a man of yourself. (SN 97)

After being unsuccessful in the realm of human relationships, Aasha Rani comes in contact with Jamie Phillips who lived in Wellington in New
Zealand. When Aasha Rani is on the climax of her career in the film industry, she realizes the fact that she must marry this foreigner Jamie Phillips. She does so by marrying Jamie Phillips and beget a daughter whose name is Sasha. She enjoys life with her husband because she has good views about him. She finds a real manly charm in Jamie Phillips. She praises him:

You are a good man Jay. And I promise I will be a good mother to Sasha. (SN 129)

Aasha Rani’s marriage with Jamie Phillips is not the end of the story of the novel rather it is the beginning of a new term in her life. Her husband Jay is extremely conscious about her future and that is why he suggests Aasha Rani to return to India after five years. He realizes the fact that Aasha Rani cannot stay in New Zealand forever. And she must return to her own country. When Aasha Rani returns to India, she finds that her own sister Sudha has emerged a big star in Bollywood but people had yet not forgotten her. She finds that her Amma had become too old, suffers from various kinds of diseases like joint pains, blood pressure, and hypertension. But her Amma once again a superstar, if she attempts her career in this direction once again. But here Shobha De truthfully narrates the story that how Sudha has become indifferent and hostile against Aasha Rani. Sudha, in one of her interviews blows many words which are painful in nature. Sudha says about
Aasha Rani, “Bechari akka, I can understand how she must be feeling, now that I am the star and she is a poor nobody”. (SN 134)

Her husband Jay also decides to leave India because her daughter Sasha is not interested to live in India. After the departure of Jay to New Zealand, Aasha Rani once again tries for the roles in the films once again. But she has been disappointed because no producer takes interest in her to provide the leading role. She has been offered the role of the mother. Thus Aasha Rani’s fall from the status of a star to a mere character is quite evident. On the other hand, the departure of her husband Jay and daughter Sasha father shocks her emotionally and there is no compensation for this emotional void. The death of Akshay Arora adds more shocks to her injury, Sasha always tells her mother about her loneliness and seclusion caused by her departure to New Zealand resulted from her mother. Aasha Rani decides to meet her daughter is not welcome by her husband because he has involved with another girl Alice. In the birthday party of Sasha, Aasha Rani is humiliated by her own daughter, “Don’t touch me I am not your daughter. I don’t want to be your daughter”. (SN207)

Here, Aasha Rani’s condition has become adverse because she lost not only her daughter but also her husband, who doesn’t show any kind of affinity with her. Here we find the breakage of the relationship between the husband
and the wife, who stand on the opposite poles and have different visions and ambitions towards life. Jay frequently tells about his relationship with Alice before Aasha Rani without any hesitations:

I love the girl. She loves me. And she loves Sasha. Things just worked out that way. I hadn’t planned it. I love you too, but differently. We have grown apart. We have been drifting off for quite a while now. I guess it was Sasha who was the common factor. Now that she is older and has a mind of her own, we should allow her to choose the sort of life she wants herself. (SN 202)

In these circumstances, Aasha Rani has no choice to continue her living in New Zealand and she decided to come to London because it is impossible for her to live in Madras along with her Amma and Appa. She suffers from loneliness and a strong sense of depression and bewilderment which makes her completely broken down. But fate does not leave her alone here also. Here, she becomes the victim of her own cobweb. Here she meets with Sonali who gives her a new job. Here, she witnesses the murder of Bhaskaran. After sometime fate once again forces her to return to India from where she once started her journey. After her return from London, she decides to meet Sudha. When she meets Sudha, she realizes the punishment for her sin. But here
Aasha Rani like an elder sister consoles her and both decide to stay together and start new life with firm conviction. Here we find a journey of a woman in male-dominated society who easily becomes the victim of ostensible high profile society in which there is glamour, romance and money and there is no sense of emotional attachment. A.G.Khan rightly remarks about the thematic perception of this novel in these humorous words, “‘Vatsyayani’ who is “educating the ignorant Indians about the sublime world of cunt and cock”.

Shobha De shows how women are critical to each other. The role of Linda who is a journalist of a film magazine is extremely important because she exploits her relationship with Aasha Rani publicly. Linda is very formidable and she is aware of the trick of the trade in publication. She does not show her shyness to write the secrets of the life of Aasha Rani. She uses her pen against Aasha Rani when she comes back from New Zealand. Gita Barua writes about the encroachment of the journalism in private life and how this negative sense of journalism can affect the career of anyone:

Through Linda’s character, we come to realize the power of a journalist in making or marring a film star’s career. Like other characters in the novel she is guided by selfishness, professional gain and other considerations rather than human relationship. It is this hollowness of the film world that makes the life of film start
miserable and empty, driving them to alcoholism and suicide. Aasha Rani in one of her desolate moments does attempt suicide and although with all possible secrecy maintained the news leaks out to the press. (177)

In this way we find that Starry Nights categorically highlights the exploitation of women, miserable condition of the high profile women at emotional level, the liberation of women, sexual harassment of women and above all the domination of men over women in bold and candid manner. In spite of Aasha Rani’s rise and fall, the real condition of women is not better. The words of Sonali are the ample clarification of the pathetic and compassionate condition on the one hand and the situation of glamorized high profile society in which everything is possible on the other hand:

These men who seek out company are powerful, rich and influential. They control the world. They find us relaxing, charming and desirable. We are doing them a favour-they spend their days under stress and tension. Their lives are complicated, their wives are bitches, their children hate them and their English girlfriends use them. We are safe. We give them what they want. That’s why we are successful. (SN 213)
In her delineation of women characters like Aasha Rani, Sudha, Linda, Malini, Rita, Sonali, etc. Shobha De shows her deep insight. She presents the suffering of women because of their incapability to cope with the adverse conditions imposed on them. Shobha De seems to suggest that if women have to enjoy like men, they have to demolish their own mythical and traditional image. Shobha De’s women in *Starry Nights* protest against the massive oppression and exploitation caused by the traditional and mythological image. She is the champion of delineating characters like Aasha Rani. Even though Aasha Rani’s character cannot be ideal, her relationship with different men at different time cannot be appreciated but her journey from ‘ignorance to knowledge’ and from ‘innocence to experience’ is the real epitome of her life in the novel. Critics are very fond of doing exercise on the question of feminism in handling the character of Aasha Rani. Shobha De while writing in the post-colonial phase is conscious about her role as a writer in depicting the real condition of women in India. Jaidev, an eminent critic rightly remarks:

A feminist novel for India is not a novel which a woman will write just because she is a woman and knows how to write. It will be written by one who has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and
invisible contexts, by one who is not carried away by fetishes but is mature enough.(63)

In her novel *Sisters*, Shobha De once again delineates the theme of exploitation of marriage, hollowness of marriage, inevitability of divorce, independence of women in every shere of life, emergence of strange human relations and the career of women in public and private corporate world. *Sisters* is unique in many sense. Perhaps for the first time, Shobha De here deals with the conflict of the liberated women protagonist who has become the victim of the conflict between her ‘two selves’ – ‘personal self and social self’. The setting and milieu of the novel is quite suitable to the genius of Shobha De, because it deals with the story of two wealthy and high profile socialite women who are the victim of love and lust, ambition and passion and emotion and logic. Like her earlier novels, the themes of the exploitation of women, marriage, divorce, and liberation of women, strange human relationships and the concept of new women in the era of professionalism and materialism have been frankly and candidly presented. E.Satyanarayana comments on the story of *Sisters* in these words:

Shobha De’s *Sisters*, set in the corrupt world of big business appears to tell an interesting story of two wealthy and socialite women who, driven by ambition and lust, are involved in an
unending rivalry. But it is in Mallika (Mikki) that we encounter a woman who struggles against the constraints of being a woman and finally completes her Odyssey towards being herself. (211-212)

In spite of Shobha De’s presentation of too much sex, love and lust, her novels are also important in unfolding her feminine sensibility in which there is frank delineation of her feminine attitude and feminine empowerment. She uses sex, romance, love, lust, etc., in order to highlight the different roles played by women in different time and in different circumstances. Janaki Ramchandran rightly remarks in this direction:

It is important for women to talk about it. Our mother endured it silently because it was a taboo subject. Nobody was interested in women’s view on sex. Whether it was erotic poetry or prose, the perspective was always that of a man. It is only now that women are expressing the way they feel about this most elementary ... aspect of conjugal life. It is a kind of catharsis. (Survival Tactics-The Hindu)

Sisters is quite appropriate in unfolding the theme of conflict. The novel has an effective sense of women psychology and its focus is totally
stuck on the most enchanting corporate world which has emerged in 1990s after the great economic revolution. Even though it is the story of two sisters but there is a deep diving into human emotions and passions regarding the delineation of the concept of new women in male-dominated society. The thematic pattern of the novel unfolds in a Gujrati milieu. The young girl Mallika or Mikki Hiralal who lived and studied in United States of America had returned in order to attend the funeral and perform last-rites of her parents who have died in a tragic air-crash. After the last-rites of her parents she discovers the truth about her father’s real character. She knows the fact that there is a half-sister Alisha Mehta born of a mistress kept by her father. After discovering the fact she becomes totally shocked about the real behaviour of the male. She thinks that each and every male is the victim of the double standard of life. She thinks about him, “Her father, always distant, now seemed a total stranger. A stranger who has led a sneaky double life”. (Sisters 30)

Mallika or Mikki is not quiet prepared for any responsibility. She is also unaware of the various kinds of roles she has to play during her corporate life. In the beginning, she things that if she looks after the business of her parents, she will loose freedom and deprive from the colourful life. Shobha
De tells about her conflict and confusion in taking over the responsibilities trusted on her after the sudden demise of her parents in the air-crash:

Given the choice, Mikki wanted this nightmare to end now. Her parents were dead. There was nobody she cared for. And nobody who cared for her..... Her life in India.....was over. (sisters9)

After the demise of her parents, she has no alternative. Even, though she is lonely but she has to look after the vast industries of her parents. In reality, Mikki has no idea how to govern and manage the corporate world but her dormant talents comes out on surface and she boldly decides to lead in the industries of her father. Gradually she begins to show her authoritarian and managerial skills. She handles the business very well. She becomes a successful businesswoman and her role is quite dominant in taking the decisions especially in the time of crisis and tension.

Her half-sister Alisha Mehta plays an important role in her life. In the beginning both Mallika and Alisha are strangers to each other but Mallika does not show any kind of hatred towards Alisha. She makes Alishe hereafter and that is the uniqueness of her character. E. Satyanarayanan rightly remarks:
In reality, Mikki, with the demise of her parents, feels lonely. The existence of Alisha, although strangers to each other, gives her a sense of solace and she is strengthened morally. It is not Alisha’s wealth that makes Mikki think of her, but her faith in human values that prompts her to establish relationship with Alisha. (212)

Mallika successfully reins her father’s empire in her hands. But gradually she comes to realize that it is not easy to survive in corporate world Ramanbhai, an employee of her father makes so many obstacles in order to disrupt her business. Ramanbhai in a spite of showing sympathy and consolation to young girl, who has just lost her parents, always discourages her decisions. Ramanbhai says about her:

“Had you been a son your father might have taken you into his confidence from a young age and guided you properly from the beginning. But as a daughter, all he wanted for you was a good husband-that is all. My advice is – leave these serious matters to me. I am there to handle them. Trust me. I will guard your interests like a father. But you will make things difficult for yourself if you do things without consulting me.” (Sisters 30)
In *Sisters*, Shobha De also handles the theme of marriage. Mikki goes in for a middle aged Binny. The aggression of Binny attracts her too much. She remarks about Binny:

May be he lacks finesse, refinement; nevertheless Malhotra type men are better. An older man, an experienced one and together you would make quite a team. (*Sisters* 58)

Mikki marries Binny with great hopes and aspirations but her marriage with Binny brings horror and terror in her life. Binny is a man of different attitude. He is quite authoritarian. He has no respect for the emotions and sentiments of Mikki. After few days of her marriage, the conflict starts and her exploitation begins. Binny was a womanizer and has different personality. He uses Mikki as a tool to maintain his superiority in the society. The process of dehumanization of Mikki starts very soon. All her property is being transferred to Binny. She has been denied to conceive child. Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner in life and in business both. He wants to keep her in the boundary of the house. He deprives her freedom and public life. He tells her his opinion about the wife:

Who stays at home and looks after...our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their
husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going. *(Sisters 109)*

Mikki tries to make her relationship with Binny healthy. She gives up each and everything in the hands of Binny. Her condition has become pathetic and compassionate. She reacts in humble manner:

> I can look after you and look after at least a part of the business. We could work together. I won’t have to wait hours to see you. *(Sisters 109)*

*Shobha De* handles the theme of male domination through the marriage between Mikki and Binny. The marriage between Mikki and Binny is the symbol of dissatisfaction and hatred right from the beginning. Mikki is an educated girl and she does not want to be crushed and handled in the condition of slavery. For her materialistic and physical pleasure without freedom means nothing. *Shobha De* shows that only economic freedom cannot bring any kind of real liberation in the lives of women. Here the observation of E. Satyanarayana is quite appropriate:

> Mikki’s continual protest with Binny results from for innate desire for freedom. Ironically, she never thinks of a life beyond marital bounds. It is her dream to be both an ideal wife and a
responsible social being that gives the novel a moral dimension. For Mikki, materialistic pleasures without freedom of the 'self' mean nothing. In fact, Shobha De’s women have been liberated from the economic constraints. What they search for is the personal freedom and when they are denied this, they turn rebellious. They express their anger by resorting to what might be termed as unethical acts that is breaking the marriage oaths or indulging in extra-marital relations.(214)

Among Shobha De’s women characters, Mikki is perhaps the most balanced character in terms of putting herself in the context of conflict. She is always in conflict regarding her own identity – to maintain double identity – as a woman and as a human being. She always thinks that to be a woman is really a curse! She wants to resolve this tension by maintaining balance between her ‘woman self’ and her ‘human self’. She wants to be a good wife but at the same time, she does not want to lose her identity as a woman also. She herself says, “Willing to compromise her own life if it meant he would notice her, listen to her, and acknowledge her existence”.(Sisters 140)

Her attachment with Binny doesn’t last long. Binny begins to suspect her character and chastity. He throws her out of his house. Her disillusionment with Binny is being completed when he decides to divorce
her. Mikki is not interested in divorce. She tries her best to save her marriage but all goes in vein. Now Mikki is free and she is quite determined to run her industries. Now Mikki is a changed woman. Her bitter experience with Binny has made her tough and hard in terms of practical life. There is a transformation in her character and her maturity can be realized.

On the other hand, Alisha, who is the half-sister of Mikki, is a girl of different type. Alisha’s character in the novel presents a different kind of thematic pattern that is quite different. Alisha hates Mikki only for one reason—her negligence by her father. She is the victim of illusion. She has a company of friends who poison her ears against Mikki. She develops relationship with Navin, who has been rejected by Mikki. She misses no opportunity to insult her sister. Alisha leads an amorous life and she becomes a drug addict. She fails to judge her character because she is a woman of emotions and lacks experience.

Thus is Sisters, the theme of exploitation of women, marriage, divorce, identity of women, conflict between ideology and practical way of life, etc., has been delineated with firm conviction. The real charm and beauty of the novel lies in above mentioned thematic projections. Both sisters, Mallika and Alisha provide a unique milieu, setting and vision of life and they are certainly the ‘representative’ sisters.
Shobha De’s fifth novel *Sultry Days* is supposed to be the mature presentation of the theme of human relations, sex, love, marriage, etc., in more and more mature manner. *Sultry Days* is the story of such women, who are obsessed with men and they prove their superiority by beating them in the game of love, lust and sex every time. Sharad Shrivastava rightly remarks about *Sultry Days* in these words:

The fifth novel of Shobha De, *Sultry Days* does contain women who are obsessed with men; they, too, indulge in beating men at their own game but here we also come across some glimpses of commitment, thereby giving credence to the fact that not all writings of Shobha De are ‘aberrations’ and that there is a possibility of even her returning to the mainstream of writing after a few ‘sallies’. (233-234)

Critics find different thematic patterns in *Sultry Days, Starry Nights, Sisters* have dominant women protagonists who are superior to their male counterparts in the projection of the themes of suffering, exploitation, human relationships, marriage, divorce, post-marital relations, love, lust, sex, etc. In this novel, we find the delineation of a man character Deb whose relationship with Nisha has compelled her to discover her ‘self’ even though the narrator is a woman-Nisha. But it is through the character of Deb, Nisha discovers her
identity and existence in the world of charm, fascination, glamour and fashion. From the very beginning of the novel, Nisha has been attracted by Deb, who is referred to as God by most of his colleagues. Nisha is attracted to Deb because his personality and character are the intermingling of paradoxes. He appears to be a man of old ages but his depreciation of morality makes him the representative of a typical modern man. He knows a large number of languages-German, French, Spanish, English, Hindi, etc. He has good understanding of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and Karl Marx. Since, he is the son of a communist, he acknowledges herself as a typical communist raising slogans for downtrodden, underdogs and underprivileged of the society against the exploitation and suppression of their emotions and sentiments. He has been arrested by the police several times for his involvements in different strikes. He has been associated with an art magazine-*Plume*. His career takes turn after his attachment with *Plume*. According to many critics and readers, it is really the beginning of the death of a communist, rebel, and visionary in Deb.

Nisha comes in contact with Deb in the very beginning. From her very first meeting, Nisha acknowledges Deb as a man of high visions, but gradually she understands the real nature of his character and that is why he loses all shreds of self respect. Nisha spends very ordinary life. She tries to
work hard in order to make her life comfortable. She is not interested to jump into the world of glamour. She is not desired of spending fascinating and glamorous life. Sharad Shrivastava rightly remarks about the derivation of Shobha De in the portrayal of the character of Nisha in *Sultry Days*:

> As for Nisha, hers is a very ordinary course of life where in she tries to make her mark through sheer hard work and application. Although herself a member, yet she always remains at the periphery of affluent and glamorous life. In other words, she is quite unlike the other women of Shobha De who revel in the life of glamour and sex. Here it may be remarked that it is the ‘commitments’ of God that help Nisha to remain at the periphery of such a life.(234)

Deb enjoys the power and money which is against the principles of communist ideology. Nisha is deeply devoted to Deb but her relationship with Deb reveals the gulf between her own commitments and Deb’s pseudo commitments. She, like a lady of principles, is not interested to approve Deb’s new way of life. She rejects the ironical life of Deb in bold manner. For instance, she reveals her mind against the paradoxical nature of Deb’s character:
No I didn’t like what was happening to God at all. We were beginning to see less and less of each other now that he did not need to touch me for cash that often. He was getting ahead professionally, meeting all the VIPs in town, interviewing culture-vultures and generally being wooed by ‘all those who mattered’ in the high-life of the city. ($D$ 100)

The confrontation begins in their relationship when Nisha realizes the duality in the character of Deb. They exchange hostile words against each other. Deb calls her ‘Jhooti Bitch’ and Nisha calls him ‘Capitalist Kutta’. They do not able to understand their respective characters. Their relationship lacks mutual understanding, devotion and respect for each other.

After discovering the real character of Deb, Nisha begins to discover her own commitments. She does not want to be the part of Deb’s pseudo commitments. She exposes the real character of Deb to Yashwantbhai. On the other hand, he always warns her not to come in contact with Yashwantbhai and his underworld. But Nisha is supported by her mother and her activist friend Pratimaben. Nisha’s mother and Pratimaben want to expose Yashwantbhai on the issues of her atrocities on Pramila because Yashwantbhai had an illicit relationship with Pramila earlier. Nisha does
everything to expose Yashwantbhai as she did everything to expose Deb earlier.

There is Pramila in the novel who seems to be the representative of typical traditional women. For the sake of middle-class tradition and social values, Pramila does everything to make her morally and socially uplifted. Shobha De writes about Pramila, “A husband with a ‘solid’ job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own and all the time in the world to pursue her interests” \( (SD\ 160) \)

Pramila is not able to accommodate herself in the new cosmopolitan culture because she belongs to Nagpur which is less modern and more traditional. She becomes frustrated in the new environment. She has a natural talent of creation. She uses her talent in composing poems. She decides to leave Nagpur and settled in Bombay. Her flight from Nagpur to Bombay projects the theme of success in her life. In Bombay, her poems are translated into English and she becomes successful in her life. But her success does not make her to realize the reality of human existence. In Bombay, in order to uplift her social status, she comes in contact with Yashwantbhai. She discards Marathi and uses English, disappear from Nagpur and settle in Bombay, divorces her husband and illicitly evolved with Yashwantbhai-all these happen in her life because of her ‘migration’ from her
traditional identity. Here she miscalculates her association with Yashwantbhai, who was an underworld king and Mafia in Bombay.

Nisha becomes traumatic because of her visualization of the new world in Bombay. She discovers a new meaning in life by exposing Yashwantbhai fearlessly. She exposes more Yashwantbhai in Bombay. After exposing such persons, she realizes the importance of rest from where she has started her journey. Her ‘return’ is quite symbolic because for the first time realizes the importance of cultural and traditional roots. Shobha De writes about Nisha’s return to her own roots:

She was back with her old Maharashtrian publishing cronies.
Back to the people she had arrogantly rejected before moving on to the glamorous world of English language journalism Shruti (her daughter) was going to a neighbourhood Marathi medium school and Pramila was busy putting together a collection of Marathi poems in tortured meter.(SD 224)

In Sultry Days, Shobha De has projected the theme of suffering, exploitation, marriage and divorce, the role of underworld in shattering the hopes and aspirations of talented women in general. Nisha, Pramila and
Pratimaben are such women who do not succumb easily before their dominant male counterparts.

In Second Thoughts, Shobha De has presented an explosive tale of love and betrayal. She has beautifully handled the theme of hollowness and hypocrisy occurring in India marriages. According to many critics, the novel focuses on the hollowness and betrayal of Indian marriage. The story of Second Thoughts goes very close to biblical story of Adam and Eve. Maya, since she is the central protagonist, plays the part of Eve. She is a very attractive young girl. She is a trained textile designer. She belongs to educated middle-class family in Calcutta. She marries Ranjan who is equally handsome and charming. Ranjan obtained degree from America and has been employed in a reputed Bank. He got a small but beautiful flat in Bombay. In their very first meeting both Maya and Ranjan like each other and they decide to get married. Ranjan has a great respect for his mother who is quite happy with her daughter-in-law. She exclaims in happiness, “I think we have made right choice in Maya”.

After sometime Maya has realized the truth that she and Ranjan are not made for each other. She thinks that her marriage with Ranjan will not ever last. In spite of the fact that she has almost everything to enjoy after her marriage but she is not happy at all. She feels the fact that her husband
suffers from the sense of passiveness. She thinks that she will bear no child in future. This is one of the reasons why she feels loneliness and emptiness while living in plenty. On the other hand, Ranjan worships her mother and he begins to neglect Maya. He wants Maya to follow his mother. All the time Ranjan goes credit to his mother about his success. This thing hurts Maya because her own husband is not ready to appreciate her qualities. Maya experiences trifling situations during her four day honeymoon trip to Mahabaleshwar. She comes to know the fact that Ranjan has illicit relationship with some other women also. Maya forces him to do something but he neglects Maya’s advances:

When Maya tries to force him, he recoils – jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He keeps trembling in bed for a long time breathing heavily and asks her to stop behaving like ‘a cheap woman. A prostitute’. (259)

Maya fails to attain the bliss of conjugal life with Ranjan. Now she needs the support of someone and rightly she got a man Nikhil as her true companion. Nikhil is a young college boy. He is a man of good personality, confidence and ambitious in his way of life. He is quite responsive to the physical demand of Maya. In fact, Maya is not a cheap kind of woman. But the burning circumstances compel her to sit in the arms of Nikhil. On the
other hand, Ranjan does not like Maya’s relationship with Nikhil. He stops her to do any job outside the house. It is quite unbearable for an educated girl Maya to bear all these burdens. She admits her own pathetic lot:

Tonight I wanted to behave like a cheap woman. I was not getting any sleep. The old ache between the legs was bothering me. I reached out for Ranjan; put my arm across his shoulders. [But] I could feel his body stiffening, resisting.(259-260)

In Second Thoughts, Shobha De has handled the theme of conflict in the portrayal of the relationship between Maya and Ranjan. Both of them are strongly influenced by the traditional orthodoxy of their respective parents. Mrs. Malik who is the mother of Ranjan is always critical about his son’s selection of Maya. Mrs. Malik is an influential lady. She may have selected a Bombay Bengali bride for her son but she is not able to do so. She has sarcastic tone and content for Maya all the time. She says to Maya once:

If you ask me, it is always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background. A wealthier wife spells doom. The husband loses all control over her and she ends up having the upper hand. Such a marriage can never work which is why we
were so careful while selecting the right candidate for Ranjan. (ST 231)

*Second Thoughts* brings out the truth that more financial support cannot be the substitute for the emotional urge. Her husband Ranjan is responsible for her emotional breakdown because he thinks to support and provide everything only on financial terms. He thinks that Maya should always be careful about his choice and she must do her duties as a married woman. Her rage against her husband is the result of her husband’s negligence towards her burning emotions and passions. She realizes the fact, “It was never a home. My home. Our home always ‘the house’-impersonal’ distant, cold”. (ST 227)

According to critics, Maya’s failure to achieve sexual satisfaction with Ranjan is the real reason of the failure of her relationship with her husband. She has no sex life at all with Ranjan. She is happy with the physical demonstration of affection by Ranjan. She understands the fact that mere affection cannot bring the real charm in her life. Ranja has a genuine lack of interest in Maya. The result is inevitable. Maya deepens in depression. There is no one in Bombay with whom she can share her miseries. There is no one with whom she can confess her problems. She says:
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Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belong to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own. (ST 266-267)

This feeling of Maya is quite suggestive of her imposed seclusion. It causes a sense of dissatisfaction in life and unsatisfaction in love. She finds Nikhil—a true friend because Nikhil encourages her to do something spontaneous in her life. She feels good with Nikhil. On the other hand, Nikhil is full of life and care for her. But she knows the fact that her dream should not be fulfilled with Nikhil also. She realizes the fact that there is no one except a husband after a married life can support and fulfil the dreams of
a wife. On the other hand, Nikhil encourages her to involve with him physically. Nikhil is a typical product of modern generation. He does not hesitate to exploit the emotion of a frustrated wife like Maya. Alka Saxena rightly remarks:

Shobha De throws light on the reality of the people who fall in Nikhil’s category; again a typical attitude of people who belong to his class. Nikhil, too, seems to have preconceived notions of marriage. He is a product of the modern generation, a man who does not mind taking one-night-stands with frustrated married women. (269)

When Maya receives the news of Nikhil’s engagement, she has been shocked. Once again, her dream was shattered. She feels bewilderment and boredom caused by her affair with Nikhil. Her condition is full of pity and she has an open space that no power to cover it:

The more I stared at the spilled soup, the funnier I found it. I knew I would have to make it again from scratch. So what? I had all the time in the world now. (ST 289)

Thus, Shobha De has magnified the theme of unfulfilled love and unbloomed marriage in Second Thoughts. She has presented a more realistic
tale of Maya and Ranjan, who are the victims of self-assertiveness and self-centered ambitions. Here we find a more explicit theme of love and betrayal which are the features of middle-class society which is bound to suffer on account of the 'transformation' occurring every day. So, in Shobha De's almost all the novels-starting from Socialite Evenings to Second Thoughts, deal with the theme of unfulfilled love, broken marriages, inevitable divorces, unsatisfaction in love, dissatisfaction in life, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, role of the women in traditional Indian society and above all the emergence of a new woman in Indian society, who is able to cross the limits without caring her traditional and conventional existence.