CHAPTER III

ELEMENTS OF POSTMODERNISM IN

SULTRY DAYS AND SISTERS

Section-I

3.1 SULTRY DAYS

“Finally, a book by me that they (her children) can read.”

(De, Shobha: 1994: Title Page)

Shobha De is known as a fiery, bold and revolutionary writer encompassing the changing trends in the social structure of the modern Indian society. Her fifth novel Sultry Days is no exception. Sultry Days breaks the regular conventional themes of De and moves beyond the regular relationship of man and woman and the graphic description of mating process between man and woman. It truly represents the changing perspective of a woman in India, irrespective of the social class. The novel is a striking rendition of the spontaneous challenges and struggles posed by the postmodern era.

Shobha De is admired and many times criticized for her shocking commentary and factual description of the modern society. Many a times her novels expose the hypocritical realities of the relations and commitments of the young modern generation.

3.1.1 Sultry Days: A Depiction of Post-Modern Woman’s Self-Determination and Strength:

In the name of love and commitment, most of the time a woman faces loss and deceit. She undergoes a long and unending period of abuse and violence. The physical pain can
be seen and measured and healed but the emotional pain which is hidden behind silent cries is never seen or measured. Physical pain is eased with remedies but emotional pain can be fought only with self-determination. *Sultry Days* is an example of this fight for freedom and liberation. *Sultry Days* symbolizes the voice of the modern woman. The voice has been rendered the strength to vocalize the hidden, suppressed and safely vaulted emotions of womanhood. It’s a cry for freedom from the invisible clutches of the patriarchal society which holds the woman completely.

Shobha De has penned almost fourteen novels till date and has been applauded by a section for her boldness in choosing the themes for her novels. She is praised by a few for her convincing openness and few finds her to be repetitive and conniving as they are of the opinion that she mints the upper socialite society and most of the time her characters are exaggeration of her imagination. Every novel of Shobha De, be it the *Socialite Evening* or *Sisters* or even the less popular *StarryNights*, is viewed as a pornographic rendition of social life. Exception to it *Sultry Days* comes out to be more than a narration of the elite social class and lifestyle. It is an exception in a sense that it is neither an attempt to expose the elites nor about trapping men for sex and life. In this novel, De silences her critics with the sensational narrative of the main-stream new woman; Nisha, a new woman, is the narrator in the novel. Portrayed as a round character, Nisha presents the modern style of neo-rich people. A noted critic Indira Bhatt in her *Comparative Study of Shobha De’s Sultry Days and Gita Mehata’s ARiver Sutra* concluded that both the themes run on the theme of post-modernism but *A River Sutra* unwraps orientalism whereas Shobha De explores neo-modern lifestyle and living.
Nisha, the heroine, surrenders to plain desires, a woman who takes life dreams of independence and gets trapped in her own choices, is the protagonist. She is a victim of her own victimized passion. Shobha De bluntly gives a narration of Nisha, her life, the people around her, their influences and roles in taking her towards her nadir and then giving her the strength to strike back.

*Sultry Days*, is not a simple presentation of the ideal picture of the bond between husband and wife but also deals extensively about the influences on other people. Here, she doesn’t isolate marital relation from other family and societal ties. Marriage is dealt offspring of the several relationships as a part of the society.

Based on the pre-notion essentials of commitment and marital allegiance, a husband and wife relationship is taken for granted. The man, husband is the master of the house, and the woman, the wife, is his estate. The other characters around Deb and Nisha, Shobha De presents several other relationships which are an essential part and parcel of our life and extremely important in the plot-construction of the novel. She highlights the influences played by the people who make a part of family and society too. *Sultry Days* deals with influence of control in the form of superior role, self-acclaimed honour and money and guidance in the making of human relationships in the modem times.

**3.1.2 Sultry Days: A Picturesque Narration of Modern Upper Class Society:**

Shobha De’s novel, *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
The novel is in the form of layers depicting many shaded sides of Mumbai’s upper class society. The central character, Deb has a heartless attitude towards women. He looks at them as object of sexual lust and uses them for sexual satisfaction. The dreamy fantasy of love and commitment is replaced by the real life harsh realities. The revelation of truths and exposure of the fake personalities reveals the relations between Nisha and Deb in *Sultry Days*. Nisha senses that Deb is no longer committed to their relationship; she realizes that he was never interested in her. She discovers that he is disloyal and insensitive so she gathers her courage to leave him and move ahead in life.

The postmodern urban woman is independent in choosing her life partner and career options. Nisha goes against all expected norms and takes up a job with a mediocre ad agency after completing her graduation with English honors. She crosses the limits imposed by her family. At the agency, Shobha De introduces new characters; this is Kawla, who resembles a crow. Kawla again is a manifestation of an understated character, he is hated by everybody. People approve that he is talented but never express it openly. They try to belittle Kawla. But Nisha turns into an exception. Even though they have no common language, they struggle on – Nisha in broken Marathi and Kawla in fractured English. Kawla is a sensible man, he senses the fishy nature of Deb and disapproves him who often bursts in on them and laughs openly at their exchanges. Another character which is active here is the receptionist; Anu always scrutinizes the phone calls and letters of Nisha which causes discontentment between them. As Nisha shares everything and talks about everyone with Deb, she also mentions about Anu’s
unusual behaviour and their discord. Nisha is taken aback by Deb’s comment on Anu’s scrupulous behaviour, ‘Anu is a frustrated woman and she needs a screw’. For a moment she disregards Deb’s irrational comment but obsessed with Deb, she simply takes it as a comment and ignores it.

Nisha is sensitive towards her Deb, she feels that the odd behaviour of Deb is due to the latter’s feeling of isolation and belongingness. Deb often talks about being neglected and negative attitude of his family members. She concludes that as he was underestimated by his father and brother, he is disgusted and frustrated and as such repels by his anti-social behaviour. Deb’s father is an idealist, a comrade; he is fonder of his work and idealism. It is often seen that when the father is obsessed with a sort of idealism, it is very difficult to concentrate on children properly. Either the children are abandoned for lack of time and space or they become victims of personal pride and egoism. Comrade is no exception, as a father he fails in molding Deb into a noble person. As most of the time, he is busy in his political activities. Comrade often courts arrest at Flora Fountain or kala ghoda. Sometimes, he is accompanied by his second son, Toro. Whenever Deb tells Nisha of his longing for his father’s attention, she feels tender towards Deb. She empathizes with Deb as she too is a victim of isolation, although hers is a high profile and socialite isolation. The feeling of sympathy and a desire to find a common companion Nisha turns into getting attracted and carried away by Deb. She is swayed away into a world of imaginations. Her dreams are occasionally disturbed by Deb’s selfishness. It bothers her and very soon she realizes that there is a certain discord between her expectations and reality. Each time he touches her. She is longing for love and he for money. She seeks much retrospection in love from him but he is quite indifferent to fulfill her emotional
cravings. Once, walking back from the office, she stops at a sandal store but he jabs her to move on saying: “Forget it yaar you don’t need any chappal–wappal. Come on; let’s go, get me an umbrella” (12). He is more of self-centered and uses Nisha as a source of his personal fulfillments. During such times his attitude and sudden mood fluctuations leaves her dilapidated and she dare tell him that she wants it. She wanted to tell Deb that it’s not the chappal she wants, but it is a childhood fantasy to have a pair as it is one of her childhood longings about red shoes.

Nisha seeks a companion in Deb. She wants a sense of completeness for herself. She desires that all her fantasies and dreams be fulfilled by Deb as she remembers that her parents always try to discourage her to follow her longings. She wants to share all this with Deb, but he is not at all interested in her childhood or her outlook. Nisha trusts Deb; she thinks that Deb is different. He is unique and lives life on his terms. He has expensive tastes in most of the things. He has a high sense of dressing and is conscious of high profile public appearance. He would spend hours to buy a perfect pair of loafers. Nisha is carried away by his little details of perfection and she expects he would encourage her to do so.

3.1.3 Exposing the Class Differences: A Rendition of Postmodern Conflict:

Nisha is obsessed by Deb and does not to notice his shortcomings. As it is told and also witnessed that love is blind, she is blind towards every fault of Deb. Her father blames her for falling in love with him as Deb has neither looks nor money. She likes him for being different from the ordinary. She gives him an extraordinary super persona. Unlike other boys, he does not want to work as he has disregard for it. Every little thing that Deb said
or did or every big thing that Deb talked about was bigger than her, she tells her father that she loves Deb for his inadequacies and incompleteness and he nearly falls off his easy chair. In a fit of rage he prophesizes that Deb will ruin her one day, but she backs Deb by saying that he is different from the league. At this point of her life Deb meant everything to her, she believes that Deb is not interested in wealth as it is only a means to an end. Though Nisha belongs to the upper class, she disapproves of the ways of high-class women and chooses Deb as her life partner. She was looking for an ideal man who respects and loves woman. But it is quite unfortunate that her false apparitions of Deb are shattered into pieces. She soon realizes the bitter and painful truth when Deb turns out to be no different from most of the men who teases women with filthy comments. Deb’s comments over women hurt Nisha very much. Once, on seeing her mother in sports dress, he comments that she needs a good screw. Then she screams:

Oh, shut up! How dare you? You and your filthy mind. What would you know about the needs of ladies – you who have no background, no class, you filthy bastard (22).

But it does not upset Deb at all. Nisha is not able to differentiate between Deb’s personal life with his superficiality and that is why she cannot bear how ruthless Deb is in his descriptions of his parents and their lives. When objected by her, he depicts the act of his parents’ while they are lying down on the floor. She scolds him for having no respect for anyone or anything.

L. Sonia Ningthoujam in her article, Aesthetics and morality: Emergence of the New Women” asserts:
It is only the female protagonist Nisha, Deb’s lover, who is shown as a woman who disapproves of the society of their high-class women, a class to which she herself belongs. Through these women characters De sheds significant light on the important issues which give morals of these women a new face. (Ningthoujam, Sonia L.:2006: 71)

Till Nisha meets Deb, her father is the most important man in her life. He is working for a multinational, which sells a range of useless products. Her father and mother come from entirely different backgrounds. Her mother is from Ahmadabad and her father from Mumbai. She always loves to know the story of how they meet and get married but her mother does not give a chance to her to know. Nisha misses having brothers and sisters. Once she asks her mother why she stopped with her and that made her uncomfortable. When asked by Nisha, her father tells that they were very young when they got married; and her mother found it difficult to handle a baby so they kept postponing, having another baby. But she does not like this story at all. When she tells Deb about her father’s explanation for which he responds that her father is lying.

In India, parents at times feel delicacy to look into the personal life of their children. Nisha’s parents soon begin to act they do not know of Deb’s existence. He is never referred to by name and his calls are rarely taken. In some of the elite families, daughters act against the wishes of their parents when they are in love. Each time Deb’s father is arrested, Deb has to go and touch the rich uncle for bail money. This is one thing that depresses him but there is no choice.
3.1.4 Sultry Days: A Realization of Inner Strength and the Need for Personal Freedom in the Postmodern Culture:

Nisha is carried away by Deb as an infatuation: Deb is the lover boy. He is not an ideal hero with physical beauty or strength. Nisha is mesmerized by his instance passion for life. But after a long commitment, she discovers that Deb’s regular as an insensitive womanizer. Nisha is helpless and blames another character Yashwantbhai for the changes she noticed in Deb. But soon she realizes that it is not the people or conditions around her which are responsible for her personal pain. She also understands that it is time for her to search the culprit outside. She makes an apprehension that the victim and the culprit is she herself and she needs to call off her relation with Deb as it was her own decision to enter into it. She is now self-determining and she seeks solace in relating to the common man and common woman in the society. She steps down the rung of the upper class, especially people belonging to the middle-class. She develops deep core sympathy with people who are underprivileged and underdogs of society. She contemplates in her mind about her relationship with common people when she has come to see Deb in the hospital: All sorts of pictures flashed through my mind; I thought of the wives who wake up at 5 a.m…. Did they communicate or merely talk. (280)

Actually Shobha De investigates a marital fidelity as well as romantic commitment and this turns into a never-ending challenge. We are left to decide whether it is a changing trend, complexities of personalities or repulsion to cheating. More often than not, this happens because a cheating spouse will rarely admit the truth even when confronted with evidence of his or her guilt. Sadly enough, some level of suspicion might actually be warranted from time to time. Research indicates that if someone wants to look for
deception in his or her own life, the best place to start is close to home. Lovers often lie about their true feelings for each other, the feelings they have for others, their level of commitment, and their whereabouts. And people tend to tell their most serious and consequential lies to those they love.

3.1.5 Transformation of Nisha from Submissive to Aggressive: A saga of Self-

Realization:

Love is an emotional experience for women. Whenever a woman falls in love with a man whether he is her lover or her husband, she is looking for an everlasting commitment. A woman looks for a great deal of trust and faith and she in return wants complete fidelity. But time and again it has been observed that men cheat on woman. When it comes to love and marriage, people expect a spouse to be completely honest. But at the same time, everyone values their sense of freedom and privacy. So while romantic partners typically want to please each other, sometimes couples have competing goals, which can make telling the truth more difficult. As it stands, our close relationships involve a lot of truth-telling as well as some dishonesty. If love was straightforward and unchanging, that would make things easier. But when a close look is taken at the nature of love and romance, one thing becomes clear: love creates happiness and heartache, opportunities and constraints, joy and sorrow.

For the most part, spouses are considerate, honest and kind. But at the same time, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, sometimes betray those they love. Deception comes in handy when people want to limit their partner’s choices, avoid conflict or punishment or when they want to influence their partner’s behaviour. While it is not uncommon for people to lie and cheat, it is difficult to accept that one’s own
husband or wife might be doing so. Many of us have caught a boyfriend or girlfriend lying, only to have him or her deny it—"I would never lie to you." Nisha’s story revolves around the shaded side of love and betrayal. She is a part of Mumbai’s upper class society. Covered with a colorful blanket of style and standard, this side of Mumbai is in the dark side of life. The people who are a part of this section are either searching for their identity or trying to come out of an identity by breaking social stigmas.

Nisha, throughout her life is aspiring completeness. She always searches for self in the tapestry of relationship and people. The foil to Nisha is the hero of the novel, Deb is a lost person. He looks at the society as a hindrance to his desires. He has a ruthless way of dealing with the people he meets in life. Throughout the novel one wonders why Deb exhibit spiteful vengeance. He has a heartless policy towards women. He doesn’t respect her existence. He sees her as a piece of physical body and always wishes to use her and throw her out after having sexual satisfaction. Nisha fails to estimate the element of fantasy and reality in Deb. It is observed in the severed relations between Nisha and Deb in *Sultry Days* that it was Nisha undoubted trust and Deb’s callous attitude which ruins their relationship. When Nisha feels that Deb is no longer committed to their relationship, she senses her days sultry and so she decides to live life in her own way.

Largely, a woman feels oppressive in her life when her sentiments and prerogatives are neglected by man. In the sphere of marriage, infidelity at times is the outcome of a problematic marriage and sometimes it is the cause of such a marriage. Which comes first may be difficult to understand. The reasons are many: boredom, incompatibility, conflicts and sometimes children. At times, it has nothing to do with the quality of marriage, but with the spouse’s personality. But perhaps the most dangerous reason is sexual addiction
outside marriage—the desire to be with someone just for the thrill. Wives are always loyal to husbands in Indian culture. But most of the husbands are disloyal to them leading their own romantic life. They demand loyalty from their wives ridiculously even though they are involved in illegitimate relationship. Nisha’s father too, cheats upon her mother disregard to the fact that both have vowed to be loyal to one another.

3.1.6 Breaking Marriages: A Post-modern Study of Instances of Illegitimate Relationship of Man and Woman:

At one extreme, some husbands and wives never plan on being faithful. Millions of other husbands and wives, who never intended to commit infidelity, nevertheless end up doing so. To make matters more complicated, detecting deception or infidelity is never as easy as people think. Not only can it be difficult to investigate a spouse, but doing so also raises a host of relational, ethical, and legal concerns—issues which are important to consider before deciding to monitor a spouse. In any case, most of the lies lovers tell go undetected, simply because people downplay the chance that a partner would actually lie, while in addition, they overestimate their ability to spot their partner’s lies. For the most part, the strategy of "assuming the best" works fairly well, until the day comes when it does not, and with little warning or preparation we have to confront the reality that a close relationship is not exactly what it appears to be. Eventually, almost everyone will catch a partner in a lie. Often, it amounts to uncovering nothing more than a spouse telling a small, white lie. Of course, sometimes it also involves something much more serious, such as infidelity. When deception is uncovered, even finding out the truth about a small, white lie can lead to new problems, such as increased suspicion and doubt. If a spouse is willing to bend the truth about something trivial, what about something that
really matters? When something much more serious is uncovered, people have a difficult
time coping with what they have learned and dealing with the fact that someone close to
them has betrayed their partners, It’s not so much that coming to terms with deception
will solve all of the problems that people are going to encounter, but it will help to reduce
the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty that occurs when deception comes to light.

Lack of Fidelity in married life compels a woman towards anti-social moves. The
protagonist, Nisha’s father exhibits no loyalty to his wife having extramarital relationship
with another woman at his office in the novel, Sultry Days. It makes her mother realize
her innate strength in establishing her own identity. Even though her relationship with
the other man is not fruitful yet it gives a sense of satisfaction that she taught a lesson to
the man that is her husband. Her behaviour offends Nisha’s morals but when she lands in
a similar situation in her relationship with Deb, she realizes her mother’s despair and she
forgives her.

Shobha De in Sultry Days takes on a completely new approach towards dealing with the
women’s world. In this novel also the women are crazy for men; they challenge men and
beat them in their own game. But here the women are shown to be not just blind hitters;
they are committed and want equal response from men. According to her, Shobha De’s
narratives descend to realistic level when she deals with the frustrated or distressed
women. The element of fantasy is replaced by the commonplace realism daily life. An
instance of it is the differences which revered relations between Nisha and Deb in Sultry
Days. (Ningthoujam, 92) The emergence of new woman in the high-class society today
radically defines morality being involved in strange adventures to protest against the male
hegemony. But there are days when she misses male attention. She rings Anil on the spot
but she gets his answering machine. She tries Deb at the 'plume' office but she gets Chandni who shrieks: “Where have you been hiding? What's happening? We hardly see you these days. New boyfriend or what?” (199).

There, she sees Iqbal just then who is sitting at his useful table having his fifth cup of *pudina chai*. Before Nisha can speak a word, Iqbal puts a restraining hand over her arm and pulls her down. He fixes her with his piercing stare and stops listening to her. In a couple of minutes, he gets up and drags her up with him. He tells the stunned Chandni that they are leaving. He draws her close to him. She tries to push him away, but soon surrenders to his longings. She looks around at Iqbal's famous nudes. She phones Deb when she gets home. There are no words this time expect a stony silence. When Iqbal proposes for a marriage, she gets mixed feelings. It reveals the confusion of Nisha in maintaining relations with different men. In the contemporary world, women are just conceived as commodities. There is no end for Deb’s flirtations. After sometime, Deb does not waste much time finding a replacement with a divorce namely, Pramila, who is frustrated with a boring husband, Vilas. After producing a boy and girl which she considers her duty towards her husband is over and Pramila disappears. The New woman does not want to remain as child-bearing machine in order to realize her goals. D. Murali Manohar in his article, “Rejecting the Hegemony: The1990s” says:

Pramila divorces her husband only because she marries a boring husband.

She has everything in her life – a well-settled husband, children, house and a happy life. However, she does not find pleasure in her life. She feels that her husband is a boring person and takes up writing in order to find some pleasure in life. (Manohar, D.Manohar: 2007: 154)
It’s hard to keep a relationship going strong when interest in each other has sort of died. You just get to a point where you forget that your partner is in your life and they are neglected by this kind of infidel attitude. Instead of letting them know that they are needed in our life they are cursed for being a part of us. It’s in those circumstances that one partner might feel that in straying they’ll find someone who tells they look great or that what they have to say or offer is important. It’s the need for emotional validation that can make a partner head for greener pastures.

According to a new study out of the reason and reaction of men and women in a marital discord it has been concluded that men and women react to their partner cheating differently. While men get highly jealous of cheating that is physical in nature (sex), where women get their highest amounts of jealousy is when their partner has an emotional affair. For women, forming an emotional bond outside of the relationship is far worse than, say, a one-night stand or even a casually sexual fling.

Why this is the case is based on evolution as well as procreation. Since the dawn of humanity men have struggled with whether or not their child is actually theirs and if it is then only they will provide for the child. So, that being said, in the back of a man’s mind, sexual infidelity is worse than emotional because there’s the chance that it could result in a child. It may be 2015, but we are all still products of an evolutionary pattern that is meant to keep the species alive and well.

The reason women find emotional cheating so much worse is because they’re dependent upon the resources that their male partner can provide in regards to raising a child. Again, this is evolution, not a knock against feminism or a bowing down to gender stereotypes. But before we can even fully look into someone’s reactions to their partner cheating,
we first need to examine why someone would cheat in the first place. Here are several reasons why someone might stray, physically or otherwise. Even Nisha does know and explicitly accepts his behavior. She is so much attached to being with Deb that she sacrifices her own self-esteem. But when at one point she realizes that she is cheated rather indulges in it herself. She is a representative of the post-modern independent woman. She is not economically dependent on him. These are of course not issues confined to just the upper class woman, but in a country where woman are not respected infidelity and walking out of a wedding or relationship is viewed as an outburst of suppressed love. Nisha’s relationship with Yashwantbhai is completely an example of her rebelliousness attitude towards society.

Family is an ideological structure for children. The father always expects to keep his children in the main stream. When the approaches of father and son are contradictory to each other, there can be seen an imbalance with the behavioural patterns of son. In Sultry Days Comrade has no influence over his son, Deb because of which he fails to keep him in discipline. There is an ideological difference between them. Comrade believes in Marxism and Deb is fascinated towards capitalistic views. College is a repressive structure for him. It makes him lead a disorderly life. These two polarities of life are represented as binaries of opposition in the novel.

Naturally, some of the girls are captivated by heroic deeds of riff-raffs at college level in the Indian urban context. As a result, they neglect their academic pursuit in order to extract joy from every pore of the society they live in. But it always becomes a world of fantasy bereft of reality. Nisha is a prototype of ordinary womanhood. She loves Deb at college but he fails to reciprocate her love seriously. Hence, she denies knowledge in
academics and derives joy in love with Deb. His life is dry as he believes in plastic passions. Imperiously, his life leads to uncontrollable lacking in a viable direction. It causes much agony for the inner self of Nisha. Woman considers love seriously rather than man in the Indian context. She is ready to sacrifice her interests for the sake of her lover. Though she faces the cold attitude of her lover, most of the women never resign from their affectionate relations. She waits for change in him till the end of her life. Nisha does not change her attention from Deb though he is a man of moods.

3.1.7 The Observation of Anti-social Elements in the Characters of Yashwantbhai and the People Around him:

Nisha’s relationship with Yashwantbhai is completely transformed when she determines the new personality of Yashwantbhai. Yashwantbhai is a well-known underworld don. He has been involved in several criminal cases. He has also habit of keeping several mistresses. Shobha De has projected the relationship between Yashwantbhai and his mistresses boldly. For example, the relationship between Yashwantbhai and Pramila has been accessible in fascinating as well as compassionate manner. Pramila is a married woman and she got divorce from her husband. She belongs to Nagpur. She comes to Bombay in order to seek new life. She is also a poetess. She has also left her two daughters and now she realizes herself 'free' in every aspect. She is free from the cultural loads of the married life and she has now no responsibility to bear the burden of motherhood. In Bombay, she comes in contact with Yashwantbhai and become one of his mistresses. She becomes the victim of Yashwantbhai's lust. He uses her body for his sexual gratification. There is no real love and affection between them. The real conflicts start when Pramila becomes pregnant. Yashwantbhai threatens her not to give birth and
he asks her to hide the pregnancy. Here the typical relationship between underworld don Yashwantbhai and a typical woman like Pramila who has come in the metro from the small' town in order to discover new heights of life has been presented. There are several Pramilas in our society who unfortunately come in contact with several Yashwantbhais who victimize innocent women by showing their dreams in sunlight.

The relationship between Pramila and Yashwantbhai does not ever last because it has no sense of morality, cultural outlook and social sanctions. Pramila decides to expose Yashwantbhai; she takes the help of Nisha and her mother in exposing Yashwantbhai's real character and his intention publicly. Her existence in Bombay makes her to understand the reality of fast-changing cosmopolitan culture which is supposed to be the main theme and motive of projections of the novelists.

The protagonist Nisha narrates the story of Sultry Days. Deb is the male character in the novel who is addressed as “God”. It may be said that this is the only novel in which male character has been assigned a noteworthy role. De, as usual, scorns and lashes at the institution of marriage. This disregard towards the institution of marriage which was once a sacred institution is also viewed as a key feature of post-modern literature. Marriage is not regarded as essential in the fictional world of Shobha De. In Sultry Days Deb says:

    Who knows about marriage sharrage… I am happy as I am” (35) When he does agree to marry Nisha, it is out of practical considerations of his “daal-roti, a warm bed, twice-a-week malish and a daily screw (204)

In the name of live-in relationship a man and woman come closely that he never marries Nisha even after having prolonged affair with her eloquently, testifies to his belief in the irrelevance of the institution of marriage. There is also a reference in the novel to typical
Bombay marriage ‘in which’ she goes her way and he goes his. Such marriages do not last long. The incompatibility of partners may be the chief reason of their dissolution. As one of them confides:

We tried it but he wanted to walk counter clockwise. And I prefer clockwise…. We both wanted to go in different direction. (237)

Fidelity and faithfulness in married life are just unthinkable in the case of such persons. Reema, in Snapshots, represents the majority view when she remarks:

Imagine not knowing any other body, any other feeling, and any other sensation. Forever sounds terrible. Like eating daal-chaaval day in and day out. (152)

Fidelity in persons’ demeanor and relationship is too much to expect. Their sexual behaviour turns out to be amoral and in many cases even abnormal, To Anjali of Socialite Evenings for example, an illicit love affair is a dream come true: “This is the most beautiful thing to happen to me”, she declares, “This is the experience I have been waiting for.” (96-78)

This type of expedient relationship, devoid of caring and sharing, emotional warmth and mutual fidelity, very often breaks down, resulting ultimately in suicide, divorce, and dissipation.

Sultry Days is about Nisha, an impressionable teenager who meets God (the hero of the novel) on a sultry rainy day in Bombay, whose real name is Deb. Deb has been presented by the novelist as a beedee-smoking, smelly guy with his typical “nine-day-stubble” and “matted locks “which are full of lice-nests and other creepy crawlies. (2)
One of his hands is invariably engaged in scratching: “I’d never seen a man who itched so much remembers Nisha. Scratch scratch scratch … all over again.” (2)

De’s shabby hero has another uncanny habit. In between his stories and discussions:

He’d lift up his thigh and let go without any embarrassment whatsoever. Although Nisha is gassed to death, in the beginning, out of politeness, she would “just sit there unable to move.” or block her nose and try to breathe through her open mouth. (5)

Deb does not have any physical appeal or social graces that would make him ideal-life partner. Nisha falls in love with him as soon as she sees him in the college canteen. It is one of the rare mysterious questions which can be answered only by the lovers’ infatuation. She surrenders herself to the whims of Deb and is admitted into his “court”; and then begins their long and passionate romance, which later turns into a burdensome commitment with no recluse.

3.1.8 Deb: A Representation of the Demi-god Persona of Indian Men:

Deb is nicknamend as God. He is the hero of the novel. Actually it’s not just a nickname; it’s his first name, Deb which literally means God. And with time Deb has created a persona of God for himself. He is carefree and self-dependent. Due to his larger than life talks and carelessness, he is taken as a out of the box personality. He has no ethos or pathos towards anybody in and around him. People walk in his life and walks out of his life, he is unmoved, just like the God who is beyond our approach. That reminds of the famous lines by Poet Browning, ‘God is in his heaven and everything is fine with the
world’. Deb, the God too has created a shell around him. He is unpredictable and selfless. God’s inordinate ambition leads him into the unreal world of pseudo-poetry, art for hire and compromised journalism,

Deb exhibits lack of empathy and is driven by the dual engine of immaturity and insecurity. Whenever he gets together with Nisha, he assumes her or wants her to hear his stories. It’s not just with Nisha he wants everyone around him to do so. He rarely asks others for their opinion, nor does he ask them about their experiences. And he cannot listen without spring-boarding, using Nisha as an example to tell a larger, louder, longer story.

Deb never got a chance to grieve some very damaging events in his teen years. He is emotionally immature. So in some ways after dinner with him, Nisha feels like she has had dinner with a junior higher. She feels like she has served him, but he has assumed he entertained her all evening. His Monster behaviour indicates that he cannot tolerate competition or someone else gaining control. Deb’s life is a model example of fallen masculinity, the third aspect and philosophical foundation for male chauvinism.

The code of fallen masculinity says that a “real man” will out-compete others, out control others and finally (and most significantly) have a steady disdain for women. If a man disdains a woman (just as if a woman disdains a man) he will not come right out and state it. Rather, he will show you, by small freighted statements. And that is what Deb does with Nisha. Nisha’s parents name her ‘Nisha’ (night) when she is born as there is a full moon out. When she arrives in the world, she likes the way it sounds and makes her feel very sensual and sultry. Deb changes the name of Nisha as Nasha, which literally means
‘intoxicating’. She never really likes him but she develops a deep fascination for him. She starts developing a sort of infatuation towards him that simultaneously attracts and repels. She cannot summarise the reason what attracts girls to him as Deb (God) never attends lectures in the class. Her teachers always remark that she has to take more interest in extra-curricular activities. She also loses her best friend as soon as she begins to flirt with Deb. Deb is the only one who thinks her scowl is cute. “Women have roles.” Though a non-chauvinist could say this, it is less common. Deb finds it most interesting that it is often men commanding women at large to get back into the role God ordained for them (insecurity over what will happen if a woman is in charge of . . . a man?). “Since Deb says the marriage bed is undefiled and he is the head of this home, his sexual gratification should be Nisha’s number one priority. And he wants this . . . ”(65) Refusing to see the context of the marriage bed being undefiled. Refusing to understand that head is a metaphor literally turned on its head.

“God made men more rational, therefore He asked men to have the tie-breaking vote, to make all final decisions in the home.” (106)

Nisha finds Deb’s statements are motivated by lack of empathy, insecurity, immaturity and fallen masculinity.

Now I’m for mutual admiration and desire in marriage, but a man is not the crown of creation and neither is the woman. If you want a crown of creation, it’s the two working together (Gen 2:23-25).

Sycophants, court jesters, whores, dirty old men, fixers, pretty boys and party girls drift in and out of their lives and interrupting their romance, create complications of various
sorts. Their careers take off with dizzying speed like that of metro. But after sometime everything, abruptly and harrowingly, goes wrong. The son of an indigent trade union leader, Deb scoffs at everyone including Marxists, bureaucrats’ businessmen, politicians, artists, writers and so on. But as the years go by, he is corrupted by the good things of life that money can buy and becomes the chief confidant of a corrupt businessman-politician called Yashwantbhai Dawani, who has: Controlled the purse strings of his party and arm twisted huge ‘donation’ out of industrialists and business men.

Common thing on this “very disturbing and difficult to understand” selling-out of Deb, Nisha writes:

> God was behaving like a mortal, like all the other journalists in the town, a bum who shamelessly sold his pieces for a few pegs of scotch and a five star evening … He dropped names constantly, particularly one name – and that scared me. (127)

Deb and Yashwantbhai fall out and the former is shot simply because he knows too much about the latter and his activities. Deb, who is regarded as “Yashwantbhai’s chamcha and pimp” (289) and “a spineless lackey” (290) meets with a tragic death, which evokes sympathy in us: “God had probably picked the time to die with care-defiant and alone. I (Nisha) … if you prefer to reverse the letters.” (291)

This impressive end lowers the curtains on Deb’s hectic and dissipated life. It reminds one of the ends of Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* for the ‘cases’ of both Billy and Deb are: deposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.
Thus there is not much of a story line in *Sultry Days*. As in her earlier novels Shobha De deals with neurotic people, amoral and shamelessly engrossed in their blatant enjoyment of life’s pleasures in their crazy glitter world, and the novel bristles with bizarre descriptions of all sorts. The novel is dedicated to her children. There is however, the sprinkling of four letter words, though in the first half of the book there are no explicit portrayals of the sex act. But then we do get juicy extracts, despite the novelist’s promise to her children and the itch to confirm the earlier image takes the better of her. Sex, to Shobha De, is “the bedrock of all relationships.” The novelist has presented a group of modern women, who make interesting case studies. There is, for example, Karen, Roy’s wife, who is hardly less than “an overbearing, imperious bitch.” (70)

3.1.9 Nisha’s Mother a Victim of Modernism:

Nisha’s mother is styled as a “sad woman”, a “finicky housewife” living in her own world of unhappiness and uncertainty. She finds relief only in the twice-a-week bridge session with her sophisticated friends. She has found a way to keep herself occupied. The busy schedule of her husband, Nisha’s father bothered her very much. Sometimes, she used to talk about this to Nisha.

> Baby, talks to Papa. Tell him about all the plane-crashes in the papers. Why he is killing himself for the company? … Have you noticed how often he belches these days? (23)

Nisha’s mother is rather apprehensive about the fate of her father. She is concerned about the end of their happening life and the time when they will have to quit the light of the day and move through the dusk into the night. She suffers with the same feelings of loneliness. Nisha tries her best to console her but fails. Nisha develops a deep feeling of
regret towards the strained relationship of her mother and father. To a large extent she blames her father for the constraints in their marital life. This way her father was losing respect from both Nisha as well as her mother. The confusion of dwindling life and the desire to break through it leaves Nisha’s mother in a total darkness. It is felt that she is responsible for her neglect of duties towards Nisha and that’s why does not get adequate love and direction from her.

Regardless of her home conditions, Nisha seems to be a sensible lady with healthy needs, trying to explore the scope for individual commitment, growth and fulfillment. She is pictured in the novel as an energetic girl who is high spirited and always ready to meet the hardships ahead. De has used many powerful symbols and images through which she delineates Nisha’s psyche, her need for self-expression and love and the frustrations she is confronted with. An individual’s need for love in the context of marriage, defies classification into basic or physical needs and a higher order of psychological needs or growth needs. Love-needs form a complex form of drives and part of the complexity stems from the fact that in many ways it resembles the primary needs and in other ways it is similar to the secondary drives. In particular, the affection motive is closely associated with the sex motive.

Nisha’s need for a role model becomes overwhelming and she begins to resent identifying herself with the loneliness, dullness and complacency of her home. The artificiality and glamour of her parental home fails to do any good to make her feel contented. She acts out her dissatisfaction by turning rebellious. She anticipates trying out new roles and new looks. At this juncture, when she looks out for somebody to be her model, somebody to inspire and direct her, she needs friendship outside her home. This
stage marks Nisha’s need for achieving increasing independence. This need for personal freedom is remarkably dominant need of all the young women protagonists of Shobha De.

3.1.10 Men: A Symbol of Supremacy of the Post-modern Life:

Shobha De generally provides a negative image to her male characters. He can be a torturer or a cruel person dominating over the female characters. Same is the case with Sultry Days. All the females are being tortured by their corresponding male dominating partners. A variety of characters is presented by De in the present novel.

From the very beginning, Deb is presented as an odious character. He possesses all bad qualities irrespective of the good ones. He has shown no sign of respect for anyone. The basic human tendency of being emotional is completely lacking in Deb’s behaviour. His picture, as presented by the novelist is as good as that of a brute. He comments brutally on everyone and anyone either it be Nisha’s mother or father. But this anti-hero of De is projected as a hero in his literary circle. He is a knowledgeable person having knowledge of Chaucer and Marx. He possesses Spanish and French language skills and his knowledge is enough for him to be vain. So many contradictory traits in his character push him to come out as a psychologically plausible and convincing character.

De has presented many other male-female relationships. Sometimes the male counterpart appears to be somebody useless, inept, unworthy, contrite, apologetic and unwelcomed. Iqbal is also presented with equal force. He is a handsome and cunning fellow. His weakness is the beautiful college girls. He is a painter by profession but a real hypocrite.
Anil, a yuppie friend of Nisha is presented as a contrast to God. He is not much different from the other male characters of the novel. He lives his life at his own terms. He does not go to office every day and works on his own with gadgets. His philosophy of life is proclaimed by him as:

It’s all relative. Why attach a moral to everything? It’s a running shoes hang-up for me and maybe it’s a fancy silk sari hang-up for you. Don’t tell me you don’t feel snobbish about certain things? I’ve seen it so often. Why do you criticize people who put plastic covers on their car seats and have a showcase full of imported souvenirs in their houses? Why do you look down on Vimal saris and fake silver jewellery made to look antique? (101-102)

The above statement shows the trivial outlook of male characters in De’s novels. All materialistic things are important for them but nothing spiritual has any significance. Anil came to be ‘an experimental cook’. He loves music. His love for jazz and Indian classical music and his particular liking for Jean Michael Jerri’s ‘futuristic and wild’ music show the highly developed aesthetic sense not only in the female characters but in the male characters also. Lucio is also a lover of music. He is a singer by profession and above all Deb is very good at flute playing.

The males are too self-absorbed at times they behave. Sometimes, it becomes far more offensive. They pride their professional competency and expect their female counterpart to recognize it. But, when they fling mocking sneers at their wives’ behaviour to attend a hobby class or to some charity, it smacks more of malice than of discourtesy.

God started meeting strange people like Yashwantbhai. He remains busy throughout the day in meetings at various places. He has been granted travel allowance. He has started
getting royalty for the “Brit paper” and he also collects funds from editors. Nisha is bewildered at this engaged life of God where he has no time for her but impressed to see his demand, as many foreign publications started running after him for his columns. God comments at this: “Time is money yaar, ‘he’d say lazily, adding, besides, I like screwing those fuckers”. (175)

God liked his present modern status. His plume had acquired a great reputation and it is now considered among India’s important literary journal. Although Nisha is also very happy at his success but she misses the olden days when God and she met frequently without any tension of a meeting. They were more relaxed then they are now.

God’s involvement with Yashwantbhai was also not altogether pleasing to Nisha. She thinks that God himself is creating problems for his own life. Under the pretext of winning a status, he was inviting troubles from all the sides. In spite of being warned by Nisha, God attached himself to Yashwantbhai’s task. Yashwantbhai who was looking for a reputed journalist finds God perfect for his work. On the other hand God was willing for a person to take good care of him and provide him popularity.

God is worried for Nisha’s safety. Again we observe a change in the relationship of God and Nisha. He started caring for her. The real friendship emerges out of cold relationship between God and Nisha. Both of them enjoyed each other’s company. Deb started comparing Nisha with Maitreyees, Karens, Vimla and Manju: ‘You aren’t like these other bitches. You have … what do you call it … character, You know?’(155)

God who is worried more for Nisha, than himself, suffers from the arranged murder by Yashwantbhai’s goons. The journey called life meets an end. Although God has achieved a lot in his friendship with Nisha, he has acquired name and fame during the course of the
novel but the end of this anti-hero is very tragic. We observe a drastic change in the attitude of Nisha’s father.

Self-discovery takes place in successive steps in the life of Nisha. Anxiety is tempered by positive attitude struggles and frustrations are accepted as a part of human condition. Thwarting situations are also perceived as choice situations. Frustration, to her is not what happens to her but how she reacts to frustrating situations. She does not opt out of conflict. She is strong-willed and hence remains well-adjusted in the society. Her best energies are guarded from being usurped by unhealthy drives or deprivations. The core of her resistance, integrity and sensitivity is spared of impairment.

Nisha is a growth-oriented woman of Shobha De’s fiction. Her deep desire to identify herself and achieving wholeness is found persisting in the depths of her mind, pressing forever.

Nisha’s characteristic spontaneity and cheerfulness save her from being befogged by compulsive drives in moments of weakness and frustration. Frustration disorientates Nisha and she seeks comfort in the illusion that she would keep God at her will forever.

As it is with the other healthy protagonists, the very moment of extreme frustration is also a moment of self-realization. Nisha’s sense of judgment reduces the tensions. Her disappointment with the dysfunctional sexual life and the deprivations do not become severely pathogenic because she associates sexual satisfaction not merely with pleasure or power but with self-confidence and psychological health. She does not resort to devious or manipulative tactics like the near-neurotics to manage her disappointment.
Ultimately Nisha makes a conscious choice to develop to the full status, which she is capable of reaching. As authentic by Shobha De, in several of her interviews, Nisha is to fall back on her own resourcefulness. The novel being open ended, Nisha’s decision can be interpreted in different ways. May be she is likely to pursue journalism that had always excited her and do some freelancing assignments for which she is naturally qualified. Whatever she choose to be, she means not to deny herself the rights and opportunities towards self-fulfillment. She decides to do her best in anything, she choose to do.

Curiously enough, the significant inculcation of a new aspiration and the emergence of a new horizon for Nisha being simultaneously at the very point of frustration, Nisha converts a frustrating situation into a choice situation for individual through the renewal of her psyche. The unconventional and bold move of Nisha to reconsider her friendship so as to be her perfect real self, more than and beyond being a mere woman friend is not superficial or impulsive. Nisha is a convincing picture of a woman with very clear possibilities of self-actualization.

Her courage in retaining the will-power, her grit in finding redemption from negative forces like fear and hypocrisy, her decision to remain highly self-focused and her readiness to subject herself to self-examination are some of the positive traits. This spirit of internalization is a significant query of a growth oriented personality. Nisha strongly believes that the essence of life needs not be fear, futility and defeat.

Nisha refuses to be absorbed into the grotesque and amoral crowd of high society of the rich that is engrossed in pleasure and meanness. There are two options placed before Nisha. The one is, to swim along the current like Deb and the other socialites, by hushing
up the voice of conscience and turning a sycophant to men like Yashwantbhai, the king of the underworld dons. In that case, she will get in return power, money and a comfortable life. The second option is, to evolve her image with values attached to it and swear to live up to them. Nisha chooses the latter.

She takes pride in being a woman of “exotic good looks” and in tracking her descent to ethnic groups. “I’m one-eight Turkish my great grandmother third Himachali,” she would explain.” (90)

She uses her house like showroom and is always ready to sell off her antiques and furniture to her guests who happen to praise them. Roy’s lover Maitreyee represents “the ‘available’ Bombay woman-brazen, bold, brassy”, (92) whose energy levels….were astonishing.” (92) She has hair streaked with gold and purple, but wears a swirling ghagra with a backless choli. Known for her ‘enormous vitality’ and irresistible flirtatiousness she would frankly ask “is there any special virtue in consistency?” (93) Her dressing style would change dramatically and loaded with gold and diamonds, she would feel ‘warm’ she declares “I feel like a geisha,” (146) and she behaves exactly like one.

The fate of other female characters is not different from that of the ones mentioned in the earlier paragraphs. Lotika, for example, believes that she was apsara in her earlier life and that she disturbed a ‘rishi’s’ meditation by her ravishing beauty. Now she is destined to have only one night stands and then would commit suicide. Lotika, the narrator tells us “was a sought after woman on the social circuit”. (272)

Her biggest asset being her single status; and “it was her colorful part that sent out signals” although she was “attractive in her own way.” To an interviewer, she confided
that she became the victim of child-abuse at eight, was raped by a raunchy cousin at fifteen, was married off at the age of nineteen and was divorced at twenty-four. Her attitude to all these experiences is reflected in her brief, but meaningful comment “chalata hai” (272)

Arti, an account executive is another emancipated woman in the novel. She wears, “out away sleeved choli blouses without shaving her armpits” and smokes charms cigarettes holding them” awkwardly between her fingers and blowing smoke out of nostrils.” she is not very careful about her person, her Kaajal being “invariably smudged”, and wears thick handloom saris.(99)

She keeps on raising her arm constantly which to Deb means that “It’s the animal in her.” (100) Her hands being “busy as usual tugging at her under arm hair,” (175) she would giggle and giggle “jangling the two hundred silver bangles…. on both arms from wrist to elbow.” (100) Some other female characters may also be referred to briefly. Chandani, “The D. M. O’s ‘pet’.,” (238) in her wildly colourful ghagra and tunic, looks “like a horny banjaran or a sex sweepress” (199) to her “the most beautiful thing’ was her lover’s masturbating ‘right there’ in front of her.” (120) Shona, the model from London, Knows how to look “so different from Cleopatra to Sridevi” “and wears skillfully ‘cut wig’ to hide her major beauty flaw: that is her forehead that is ‘as large as papad’ ” (136) the most sought after playback singer, Tanya, the temptress has bedroom eyes’ which look like “luminous dishes the size of a full moon.” (175) Feroz, who wants to be the first woman Parsee director of Hindi Films, has “lived, breathed and dreamed movie. (192) In reality, however, “she is a weird restrain and a sex maniac.”(194) She follows the actress “Kiki is like dynamite on the set and elsewhere instinctive and phenomenal in her” (151)
“That female is like bijli”: he says Kiki’s chief rival, Zainab takes pride in being “the film industry’s first unwed mother”. (195) The father of child being “a mysterious stranger.” (195). A foreigner not connected with showbiz at all. As the narrator reminds us, “In these filmy affairs anything goes.” (151). Cheetah, the Goan girl, “looks like a hooker from Hamburg and behaves like one” (204). None of these women can be called normal human beings.

It is through these characters’ actions assertions and behaviour that Shobha De has shed significant light on the important issue pertaining to matrimony and gender bias. Traditionally, the institution of marriage has been believed to be a religious sacrament in Indian society. The institution has provided for the society’s needs for love, security and children, the things which one needs most in life and for which we have no real substitute.

History Proves, writer Alexander Walker, “that marriage is essential to the well being human society, and that celibacy brings rain upon states.” (Walker, Alexander: 1987: 107)

The institution of marriage however is on the verge of breaking up. Amongst chief causes of the disintegration of family are: sexual promiscuity, women’s economic independence, which makes marriage unnecessary. Increased rate of divorce, and “the restless, exacting often hysterical spirit…. which tends towards discontent, indiscretion and divorce,” (Charles, Cooley: 2000:234) Marriages are no longer supposed to be made in heaven.

The age-old institution of marriage and family are under tremendous strain in Shobha De’s novels. The neo-rich Indians in her novels particularly educated, beautiful and
attractive and competent, confident and assertive socialite woman seem to define marriage afresh, in which fidelity in married life is replaced by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be put to an end depending upon the whims of the partners. Mutual fidelity till death, the highest ideal for both the husband and wife has no sense for them. Their sexual behaviour is amoral and in many cases abnormal. Like Anjali of *Socialite Evenings*, most of them would declare about their illicit affair. “This is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me,” (96) and “This is the experience I have been acting for” (78). This is not surprising that this kind of expedient relationship, devoid of emotional warmth and mutual fidelity, often breaks down, resulting ultimately in suicide, divorce and disruption of family bonds, ‘little nameless unremembered acts of kindness and love’ which makes life worth living.

Marriage not regarded as essential in *Sultry Days*. When Deb does consent to marry Nisha, it is out of practical considerations; “If you want, I don’t mind a Shaddi-Waadi- I know that will make you feel better.” (204) The fact that Deb never marries Nisha, although he has a prolonged affair with her speaks voluminously about his belief. The views of the novelist get reflected better through woman characters, Pramila a non-conformist lady from Nagpur, suffers from ‘a big city hang up’ married to a mechanical engineer, she has “everything a woman could ask for-a husband with a solid job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own and all the time on the world to pursue her interests.” (205) But she runs to Bombay leaving behind her family, to save herself from suffocating boredom and frustration. In Bombay she tries to get around in the right circles and to make the right moves; her chief aim being to be regarded as a woman of substance
ultimately, Yashwantibhai and his people see to it that she is accepted in society as nothing better than a divorced woman of bad character or even a borderline-whore.

Although Shobha De says that her female characters do “not fall into ‘New Woman’ category” for they missed this label by a generation, yet they are “a breed apart.” (153) They enjoy their economic independence and their attitude is characterized by a marked seriousness:

They carried an awesome weight of an MBA degree… on their padded shoulders. These were no-nonsense woman who had ‘taken me seriously’… workaholism for woman had become very fashionable. (153)

If married they would never the less permit the husband to expect.

his high powered wire to make his evening cup of tea and even sing an occasional ghazal in the kitchen while stirring a dekchi full of mutton-do-pizza. (154)

Many of them have also to deal with their old fashioned mother-in-law who expects the daughter-in-law “to sit for an hour long morning pooja with her” and take care of “all the other botherations,” (154) There is yet another group of modern woman taking great care to dress in “Vampish” clothes (194) Kiki’s kamsutra shenanigans are nothing but ‘porn disguised as arty erotica.’ her hostess, Tarantula, regards her simply as the tartly little bitch, though she herself is one. These women dress very carefully and refuse to grow after a particular age. As for Tarantula,
The socialite queen was dressed not just to kill but commit a gruesome murder… very forties and very Vampish. Someone had told her recently that she resembled Rita Hayworth. The queen had promptly changed back the color of her treated red hair to its original black, making sure one eye was permanently covered with tantalizing lock placed over it. (248)

Some of these professions, “using every man along the way” (204) They may also have abnormal, lesbian or pervert relations with people and even with animals.

Women in all cases are victims of male chauvinism. A typical male attitude to them is enshrined in Deb’s asserting that “Once a bitch, always a bitch” (212) and one bitch is as good as another. Pratimaben, who meets her Ahmedabad based businessman husband, only once a week, calls him her “weekend husband” and passes her time arranging ‘matkas and chatais with mirrors everywhere; assorting herself with social work, and going on pilgrimages.” (145) She also has plans for a boutique or an art gallery to make money by selling imitation dresses “Everybody copies everybody else”, she would declare “I can also copy from film stars- you know, what Madhuri or Juhi wears,” (188) Nisha’s mother was originally. “far more subdued and silent” (26) But even she cannot be expected to go on tolerating nonsense on the part of her husband. His affair with his secretary provided her to assert:

I have had enough of your bullying and hypocrisy “I have kept quite for far too long. GO to hell with your corporate nonsense. Who cares what your boss thinks? or those bloody woman think? Where were they when my world was collapsing and you were with that Sindhi whore? (189-190)
So strong are the bonds of tradition in Indian society that she still makes compromises and continuous to live with husband under the same roof. G. K. Chesterton is a right in the way when he says that in married life one has to make perpetual compromises. That Indian feminist model is not the replica of the Western one is also evident from another fact. Most ‘Old wives’- spinsters, divorcees, widows and other singles- keep on hoping against hope that someday somehow “a group of gorgeous guys will walk in and marry” them all. They live only with one hope that they would be ‘saved’ by some man. Their bitter realization comes to them rather late;

No men, No future…. Being single was not such a hot alternative; their married friends had at least ‘husband to call their own and’ they were Mrs. so and so. (270-271)

This weakness of ‘husband material’ is so typical of the Indian situation. Writers like Shobha De have concentrated on examining the position of women in the urban and modernized sector of our society, but the percentage of the privileged educated and liberated woman in it is conspicuously small. The real problems of uneducated rural woman are entirely different. Another limitation of the works of Shobha De is that - to put it in Pauline Palmer’s words,

It gives simplistic and inexact impression of women’s relations, with men as invariably antagonistic, it treats their oppression in a trans-historical light, and ignoring those occasions… when the sexes have worked together as allies… it fails to take account of the social and economic differences dividing them. (Pauline, Palmer: 1989: 69)
Despite limitations, Shobha De’s treatment of women’s problems is not without interest.

The focus of the novelist in *Sultry Days* is rather diffuse and not so precise as in *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*. In *Sultry Days*, far too many women characters emerge on the scene for very little time. The novelist has nevertheless been able to present her viewpoint in her own inimitable manner.

Over the years, Shobha De has become synonymous with an enviable appeal and an undeniable charm. The time-tested populist ingredient of sex and tempestuous style go to make her one of the most popular writers of today her mélange of themes, variety of characters, startlingly captivating thoughts, all forcefully and colorfully expressed, lend a fascination for her readers. Also there is a lot that is amusing, outrageous, thought provoking, even shocking. She has developed for her use a curious brand of English, called Shobha De’s ‘Hinglish’, which helps her immensely in presenting her narrative with an unsparing transparency. Her use of language evinces a greater mastery over the medium and less of earlier self-consciousness.

Notwithstanding all the achievements, Shobha De remains a ‘popular’ writer who banks too heavily on a proliferation of four letter words, and uninhibited employment salacious details. We must make a distinction between a popular writer and a great writer and a good writer. A popular writer is nine-day wonder and his is hardly more than seasonal. Even if we restrict ourselves to Shobha De’s own works, there seems to have come a decline in her art as a novelist. She seems to have written herself out. Hers is a case of a novelist at the crossroads, and old tricks may not help for long. The time has come when she has to embark upon fresh fields and new pastures. After reading her early novels a perusal of her latest novel is like passing from *Starry Nights* to *Sultry Days.*
The image of man that emerges from Shobha De’s novels is generally negative. A male character is almost invariably portrayed or seducer, exploiter, wife beater, rapist, torturer or a cruel and callous husband. Nisha’s father, who appears rather “artificial and little ridiculous”, (73) does not desist from having affairs with younger woman including his Sindhi secretary. With his “vacant eyes” and “empty smiles”, (63) he is given to “bullying and hypocrisy” (189) as his wife herself protests. He degenerates in due course into “a scrupled up ball of paper his shoulders sagging, his eyes hunted, his gait a listless shuffle.”(277) Basu is an ineffectual artist who is “without much of a personality and is driven to inarticulate fury.” (45-44) The head of the ad agency, Roy D. Lima is also show as “a strange man” (69): “His theatricality was so much a part of his personality that it was difficult to know when he wasn’t rehearsing for a role.” (70) Some other male characters are equally egocentric, mean, selfish and good for nothing persons. There is one D.D, nobody, we are told, “ever asked him what D.D. stood for and nobody knows.” He is a “brooding bearded, silent as death, bear of a man…. so hairy and quiet” (127). The black man stash, with his dramatic scar is charming, and a stud to boot. The novelist has not the hints and guesses thrown by her are significant.

Persons like Amar, Lucio, Pebbles, Iqbal and the like populate Shobha De’s world. Amar is endowed with the gift of the gab and his style of functioning is bull doggish and belligrant. To project an impressive image, he keeps a harem of girls and lends a futuristic value to his conversation by speaking. “Always for posterity, his conversation laced with pompous pronouncements and grandiose statements.” (259) He has a complex about his looks, and always wears a toupee to cover his bald patch and has false front teeth. But, in reality, he is impotent, although he “strutted around as a stud just to keep
his secret from getting out.” (203) Then there is Lucio, who is interested in everything in
eaching. “Lipstick, pimplies, saris,” (85) Nisha remembers:

He wanted to know everything. Little things…Lucio was involved
and attentive. He noticed when my hair was shampooed or if
occasionally … Lucio noticed my cloths my make-up, even my pre-
menstrual pimples. (85)

As Deb tells Nisha, Lucio though gifted with a musicality and in great demand to do
female voice is a Bloody & airy. Pebble, on the contrary, is a thickest and bull-like’ and a
‘rags- to-riches type’ person. He exudes ‘a raw, rough-edged sexuality that most models
in the city found impossible to resist and has had a wild reputation; It was said that he
chewed up half a dozen models a day still had energy to sample some more.

He is brilliant but impossible and is described as “a rough talking hunk with
wolf like eyes, who reportedly changed girlfriends as often as he changed bed
sheets. (95)

Interestingly enough he is accompanied by one William, who “spent his young life
dreaming of Australia and trying his best to pass off as an Irishwoman who’d been
accidentally born in the wrong country with the wrong sex.” (122)

Their company illustrates once again the truth of the saying that like meets like. As for
Iqbal, he is “a shrewd man’ who knows ‘how to market himself.”(55) He is ‘exceedingly
hand-some’ and is the cause of most incredible stories, about his explicit, “The man’s
hunger for beautiful girls matched his thirst for tea. He loved both, equally though often
the tea scored.” (55) He has a terrible weakness for fresh-faced college girls. His
paintings are said to be surrealistic and, to some, “lupine looks” and suffers from ferocious appetite for publicity.” (44) The image that he builds for himself, though “hollow and phon”, works beautifully and profitably for despite ‘the patchy quality’ of his work, he manages to get ‘crazy prices’ for them.” (44) As a painter, he claims to be “a classicist, who appreciates Rubenesque beauty. Pendulous breasts a big arse that sort of thing.” (76) He is an adept in “making... obligatory passes’ and in setting up ‘a lesbian orgy with… his whores.” (274) He has his own ideas about human relationships. “What’s wrong”, he would ask, “with immortalizing man-man love?” (56) He makes serious efforts to hide his real identity, as is evident from a one line comment from the narrator towards the end of the novel;

“Iqbal had tripped into his familiar world and as usual, everything else had melted away leaving him to masturbate with his own ego or inspiration.” (274)

His “Familiar world” has not been explicitly portrayed, but it is surely not the day-today world of common knowledge and experience. Yashwantbhai, to mention one more case, represents yet another aspect of the Bombay world. An ordinary clerk in the fisheries department, he rose to a powerful position on account of his nexus with brokers and ruthless and unprincipled politicians. His early advice to Deb was:

corrupt them at the top first and then work your way right down to the peon and chaparasi level… that way you keep everybody happy. (264)
His affairs reveal still another aspect of his personality. He is, in this respect at least, not much different from the producer Suresh Gupta who has been described as “a real bastard, filthy, illiterate, uncouth fellow.” (182)

Even, Anil who’s said to provide “such a contrast to God,” (98) is not much different from these persons in his general behaviour. He is “clean…. and so motivated and “all sick and sexy.” (99) Although he comes to his office only three times a week, his presence is noted by all; “He smelt of Aramis or Drakkar and used studio line gel in his hair. Behind the warren Beauty glasses were eyes with the colour of melting chocolate.” (99) He is a yuppie who works on his own with his gadgets and proclaims his philosophy of life as follows:

It’s all relative. Why attach a moral to everything? It’s a running shoes hang-up for me and maybe it’s a fancy silk saris hang-up for you… Why do you look down on Vimal saris and fake silver jewellery made to look antique?

(101-102)

Anil claims to be ‘an experimental cook’, loves both jazz and Indian classical music and has a particular liking for Jean-Michel-Jane’s futuristic and wild’ music. Surprisingly enough he is open to Nisha about his ‘beauty routine’ his fortnightly facials and face packs: “No chemicals, cucumber or yogurt works well for me. I’m having it for breakfast. Or I pulp a peach and slap it on.” (105) Unlike normal males, he takes so much pleasure in “wiping his precious long-stemmed wine glasses and setting the table.” (82) His fondness for pink napkins and pink shades is also uncommon. If we believe in Deb’s
assessment, “the guy looks like a bawarchi … pancy! Sissy hai saala. Hijda!” (106-107)
And again: “Two way traffic…. the chaalu fucker.” (133) In Shobha De’s world there is no death of homosexuals and lesbians. But the contemporary society, despite all its degeneration, does not lack normal people. Unfortunately they do not seem to interest the novelist. Their conspicuous absence from her novels only falsifies the basic facts about human society.

Occasionally, however, the novelist evinces rare insight into human nature. Iqbal’s angularities, for example, are rightly attributed to his childhood deprivations. Through his camouflage, the narrator is able to have a glimpse of ‘yet another persona’:

This one was almost likeable human. The whole thing worked. It was innocent, revealing and touching. Behind the fancy façade, the great Iqbal was not special at all. He was one of us. (274-275)

That human are composed of both good and bad qualities has also been shown through the example of Deb. Superficially, he would appear to be an odious character:

He is, in all vital aspects an anti-hero’ but is not without redeeming virtues. This beedie smoking, pudina chai drinking, ever scratching smelly hobo, who scrounges on others for his meals and drinks and farts in public, is rightly confronted with a Charlie, eating and drinking at other people’s expense, all time? (132).

Deb is presented as a “thoroughly detestable” “coarse, unkempt, ill mannered”, which he knows and revels in. (28) He has no sense of reverence for any one, and is “contemptuous about almost everything”. (22) This down to earth person is brutally candid. He would
not spare anyone. His mother, he says, resembles “a washerwoman or a brothel keeper, depending on her mood”, and his communist father “look is like a handcart puller from lohar chawl.” (23) He can describe with a clinical objectivity even intimate acts of his parents. His cynicism is a byproduct of his environment and sometimes he can “get terribly vicious and cross all limits.” (17) He does not feel deterred by any idea of obscenity, for “It’s all in the mind.” (17) He has no patience for “‘Socially-correct’ relationships.” (179)

Deb possesses nevertheless, certain qualities, which we would normally not expect in such a person. Notwithstanding his “Thick accent and the frequent mispronunciation of the commonest words.” (100) He had read Chaucer and Marx at ten, got a scholarship for study at Columbia and was fluent at German, could understand French and read Spanish. He had shown character at times by teaching lessons to persons like Rakesh, a sugar baron’s son, who was given to “indulging in a few sneaky tricks with girls:” (9) Deb is not boring like the other boys who wore wrangler jeans and chewed gum. He likes beauty and cares for good things like a saddle stitched all-leather satchel and a fine pair of shoes.

At times, certain traits in Deb’s character seem to be contradictory. But human nature is not wholly free from ambivalences and contradictions. Deb’s Character is psychological plausible and convincing. In today’s highly artificial set up, not many people will have courage to declare: “I am what I am take it or leave it.” (4) The portrayal of Deb’s character bear sweetness to the novel is capability of creating interesting characters. It is a pity that no other character in the novel has been delineated so convincingly and in such a detailed way.
The novelist seems to be happier when presenting female characters. It is their plight that she is chiefly cornered with she does not achieve much success with male characters. But her skill in delineating female characters is superb for obvious reasons, she does not have enough scope for each character, but the few flashes revealed are highly illuminating. Equally interesting is the novelist’s treatment of the position of women and their attitude to matrimony. Deb is liked by Nisha because he is a mixture of opposites. His looks untidy, wears day’s old stubble, always scratches his ‘matted locks which were full of ‘lice-nests, smokes ‘beedies’, is a man of loose morals, ‘has had several girls by the time he reached college.’ His attitude towards girls is also simple – ‘use them and leave them.’ Despite his shabby appearance, ‘God’s hands and fingernails were surprisingly neat and clean.’ He knows many languages such as German, French and Spanish. He had already read Chaucer and Karl Marx before leaving school. It was daring and adventurous nature of Deb which brings Nisha very close to him. But gradually he loses all shreds of self-respect. Nisha begins to dislike him. She is quite unlike other women of Shobha De who revel in the life of glamour and sex. For her money, glamour and power do not count much.

As God gets more and more the taste of ‘power’ and ‘money’, his commitments appear to be pseudo-commitments. Although Nisha does not have any pronounced commitments of her own yet her constant companionship with Deb reveals the gulf between herself and Deb’s pseudo-commitments. That she does not approve of God’s ‘new’ way of life is made clear several times by her in the course of the narrative. One such reaction would suffice here:
No I don’t like what was happening to God at all. We were beginning to see less and less of each other now that he didn’t need to touch me for cash that often… all those who mattered’ in the high-like of the city. (100)

Even the occasional meeting between Nisha and God turns out to be a confrontation. After one such ‘meeting’ God call her ‘Jhooti bitch’ and Nisha’s rejoinder is ‘Capitalist Kutta’. This is the nadir of their relationship. It is actually the point when Nisha has completely seen through his co-called ‘commitments’.

Nisha attempts to live for a cause. She begins to discover her own commitments. She does not become a part of God’s pseudo-commitments. She exposes Yashwantbhai through her write – ups. Even her mother and her activist friend Pramila Ben join her in her cause. Thus, what is found is that the character of Nisha rises. Actually Nisha’s rise has to be seen in the context of the degeneration of God’s character.

Pramila is a Nagpur woman who has everything that a traditional woman can ask for – “a husband with a ‘solid job, securing, lovely children, a moped of her own and all the time in the world to pursue her interests,” (160) Yet she feels bored, suffocated and frustrated in this environment. She has talent. This puts ideas in her head and she sets on the road of becoming an emancipated woman. She starts writing poems and within a year she decides that Nagpur is not the place for her and her talents and suddenly without informing anyone she goes to Bombay. There, her poems are translated into English. In order to become ‘the completely emancipated woman’ she divorces her husband and takes her two daughters with her. These, then are the stages in the path of her becoming the emancipated woman. She comes out from Nagpur and appears on the Bombay scene,
takes up English writing and discards Marathi and discovers her husband. In this world of glamour, a stage comes when she over aches herself. She miscalculates that Yashwantbhai, and underworld king and mafia don is in her power. This results in a traumatic experience wherein her life is threatened and she is forced to go in hiding.

Nisha is not a pampered child like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*. She struggles a lot in order to establish herself. Nisha gets a job in an advertising company. She missed adequate love from her father and mother. But she at least felt to get a bit more love from her father than her mother. Her father too, like her, was a passionate man who loves his wife but didn’t get reciprocation. Nisha explains her experience of ‘Electra Complex’ and her mother’s heartlessness towards her:

> I’m sure my father loved my mother, at least, in those days. About her I can’t say. That was one taboo area. … I asked my mother once why she’d stopped with me. The question had made her most uncomfortable. (26)

The love and obsession of to her lover God was quite strange and unusual. Usually when a gal is seen in love with someone, she cannot tolerate any third one coming between her lover and her. But Nisha is seen quite unperturbed when she come to know about a prostitute (Bijli) sleeping between them. Not even an iota of jealousy is seen coming into her heart when God explains his infatuation with ‘Bijli’. God tells her that he loves her too much and she, for him, is everything mother, sister, lover, daughter etc.

When Nisha warns him that he may be defamed for living in association with an infamous and immoral prostitute, God says candidly brushing aside her suggestion.
Who cares, yaar? I love Bijli and she loves me – bas, matter ends.

Why should I bother about what all these chamchas on the road must be thinking? Anyway – how does it affect their lives? Or yours? Do you feel jealous? (37)

He, thus shamelessly, disown the moral sanction of society and the world.

Sex and sensation are the favorite themes of Shobha De. While depicting sex, usual or abnormal, she never hesitates to go up to an extreme. She can talk about anything homosexuals, prostitutes, extramarital relations, adultery, gandus (homosexual) etc. In the chapter four, she shows us as to how the “Chitra Gallary was run by a homosexual couples” (56) and the “means hunger for beautiful girls matched his thirst for tea” (42), Shobha narrates about the abnormal behaviour of Basu with Nisha.Babli, a girl of tenth standard, is seen having great curiosity seeing the prostitution area of Kamathipura. She escapes and gets married illegally with a married man who was nearly twenty years older to her. She goes to see the brothels despite strong objection of the car driver Mirnal Laxman and stops the car in the middle of prostitution area:

Laxman growled, if anything happens to the car or to any of the baby log, I’m not responsible, Remember that I’ll tell the Seth that baby forced me. (64)

The relationship between Nisha and God is very untraditional type. They had sexual relations to many people new them secretly and as a couple. But God could not develop a genuine feeling for Nisha. He always endeavored to show himself negatively although he was not so in reality. His account of his mother, brother and father often angered Nisha.
Nisha doubted whether her relation with Deb could be long lasting. Nisha explained her relation with God and said:

Though we were spending a great deal of time together, I was getting more involved in my career than I'd bargained for when I took the job. (75)

Anil Bhandan, a marketing guy, is another interesting character of the novel impressing Nisha. He was at his early thirties and has come back from America after working with marketing agencies in America. Nisha enjoyed the joyful company of Anil during the two week estrangement from God and it ended a morning when Bijli and he came to collect her from her home.

God is apparently, unlike Nisha, seen envious about her company with Anil. He is critical of his habits and qualities too. When Nisha asked God to marry her, he brushed aside her request and jealousy suggested to get married with Anil in satirical tone. She tried her best convince him but all in vain:

God, please P-L-E-A-S-E. I know you asked me to marry you. Why do you feel so ashamed now? Everybody gets married. Even communists and poets. ‘Shut up, you silly woman. Who said anything about marriage? I was lagaring line, that’s all, don’t take it seriously.’ Isn’t it a bit late in the day for that? (110)

Shobha highlights the increasing happiness of love-marriage unequally in metropolitan cities. Such guys and gals marry each other in a fit of fun, they call it love, and not money and status providing physical comforts and social recognitions. Roy is seen upset in his
office because his “daughter, Janine, had run off with a sacked driver and shacked up with him at Bombay’s notorious Antop Hill.” (113). Arti and some others in the office don’t see anything wrong in it as to them, “Its nothing more than a class war” and a “terrible nexus between the haves and have-nots. So what if he is a driver? He is also a human being.” (113-114)

Shobha does not hesitate to use unpleasant sex related words such as ‘masturbation’, ‘fuck’, and ‘semen’ etc in the course of presentation of a scene or a dialogue. God behaving like a swine in chapter eight of the novel did not hesitate to masturbate before Chandani. One day he asks Chandani as to whether she knows about semen, gets some soaps and started masturbation in front of her. She says, “he masturbates – right there in front of me. It was the most beautiful thing. That is called love.” (120) His photo session was so notorious that most first times took mommies and boyfriends along with them for protection. This angered pebbles who said, “If you need bodyguard with me, you can go fuck yourself. I don’t have the time to waste on you.”(122)

Deb (God) had some connection with powerful politician also. He was associated with Yashwantbhai Dawani who was an influential political broker, known for his ruthless wheeling and dealing. Due to his strong political influences, he was simply called as the collector among right circles. He controlled the purse - strongs of his party and arms twisted huge donations out of industrialists and businessmen. Everybody knew about his modus operandi but nobody could dared take on him. Due to Deb’s such political connections, the boss of Nisha, Mr.Roy, wants his help in bringing her eloped daughter back to his home and requests Nisha for this.
Deb is later seen engaged in the film affairs; He enjoys every moment of his newly-acquired status in the film industry. When Nisha asked amusingly as to whether anybody sees their films? Deb looked angrily and said, “not the sort of people you know! But certainly - a film like Ghosh’s latest – that one about a woman married to holy stone - is seen by a wide audience of discerning film – goers. He would have still been hanging around mandi House trying to get some good enough. Deb replied promptly, “Good? It’s brilliant! What a camera work. What concept. What acting. He’s one of use – he has not sold his soul to the system.” (156)

De has highlighted the peripheral and insignificant position of woman in male-dominated society. The novel throws light on the sexual abuse of hotel boys as well as explanation of women at different levels. Deb talks about a film in which “a woman is married to a holy stone” (156). He also talks about a documentary film highlighting exploitation of boys in hotels.

Shobha De throws light on the hollow life and living of film and modeling world. The handling of weird clients, models and photographers were all a heartless formalities. The people of the world were mostly shameless and cave for the social sanctities. Mr Suresh Gupta was a film producer and the most sought after man in film world. All the stars wanted to work with him but he was a “real bastard, filthy, and illiterate throughfellow” (142). Yet everybody wanted to come and lick his dirty feet. Mr. Gupta came near Malini, a model, who glared at him and said politely, ‘fuck off’. All persons close enough to hear her words were stunned into silent. Mr Gupta took a little drink and started abusing everybody present, even the stars of his films. Nobody could dare to object him. They rather laughed when he started cracking coarse jokes and encourage him to drink
some more. Therefore, he rode over a deck-chair and yelled for Sonia, the beautiful young actress he was promoting. Sonia was nothing more than his slave. It was a foregone conclusion of all that Gupta had been taking undue and the fringe benefits of such an alliance. After some time, when his intoxication soared, he yelled at Sonia,

Take your Sari off – what are you hiding? What are you ashamed of? Haven’t! Seen your naked body? And hasn’t the public? Come on, we all know what you look like without your cloths. (109 )

And without a minutes hesitation, Sonia undressed herself right there in front of hundreds of quests. She didn’t even look scared. Her eyes were cold and expressionless. Nobody dare to move or say anything. Finally, Gupta laughed and put the gun away.
Section -II

3.2 SISTERS

3.2.1 Modern Woman’s Plea for Identity and Acceptance:

In the wake of the 21st century, the world is moving towards exploring the universe and the space to create live and movement outside the earth. And in India even today the urban woman with her education and exposure is trying to make a space for herself in the society. Condition in the lower middle class and the poor section is worse. Shobha De has penned many novels revolving around this struggle of woman for self-identity. *Sisters*, is a novel on this pretext. It depicts the high profile lifestyle of the haves and digs into the hidden truths or the buried filth of the upper class society.

*Sisters* is considered as a touchy and sensitive novel of Shobha De. It is known for its “Pacy narrative quality” and its “ostensibly intimate view of glitzy side” (Ramchandran, Janaki: 1997: 26) of Bombay life. It describes the socio-psychological conflict of women with intellectual liberation. A conflict which chains even the most educated and independent women from giving up people and relationships which they are bond to.

The novel deals with the theme of women’s struggle for identity in the male-dominated society. Apart from this, the novel also records the anguish of the woman in the patriarchal set up. It has been observed that not only a woman is treated as an object but she is subjected to animalism too.

It is against this objectification and ill-treatment towards woman that the novelist raises her voice. In her novel *Sisters*, Shobha De once again shows her anger against the patriarchal setup of society in which masculinity is considered as a power to misuse and
abuse the feminine. The novel blends modern life with the conventional and at the same time highlights that no amount of sophistication and self-grooming results in demanding or even expecting a fair play for the woman in the society. It raises many questions. The first one is, can education secure a superior or respectful position for woman? Another question which is imposed is, can woman expect love and commitment in return of the same? Can financial and economic independence guarantee individuality and identity?

3.2.2 The Role of Women in the Modern Family:

In India, women play a very important and crucial role in rearing and nurturing their children. She is traditionally and culturally called the queen of the house, but it is quite surprising that the lady of the house is often given the position or the place of a sofa, bed, sometimes a kitchen maid or even worse treated as a doormat in the house. To a great extent she is compelled to endure slavery. Even in these adverse circumstances, feminism flowers.

The entire house flourishes under the kindhearted and caring services of a woman. She is a wife and a companion of the man of the house. A mould of love and nourishment for the children and a bright light for everyone around them makes a house a home. She bears the responsibilities to bear a child and cherishes the pain of motherhood. Yet the million dollar question which comes up is why she is given a secondary treatment, and in few households she doesn’t even have an identity. Time and again Shobha De has pondered into this merciless treatment given to woman. An expedition to find out the causes of the degraded position a woman is placed into Shobha De, presents an insight into the life of Mikki, the protagonist in her present novel Sisters. She frames her
characters as a contrast between the modern and traditional side along with giving a thought provoking foil in the role of the illegitimate sister of Mikki.

Mikki is the legitimate and privileged daughter of Seth Hiralal. Her parents died in the air-crash. She is educated and her self-reliance in adverse conditions is seen when at a very young age, she takes over the big responsibility of managing the financial empire of her late father Seth Hiralal. Mikki witnesses the corruption around her for the first time, as a young immature teenager she was never exposed to the harsh realities of life and the world of business. Mikki faces many problems in order to accommodate herself in the corrupt world of business and corporate. After some hindrances, she comes out from those problems and succeeds in her life.

Shobha De weaves the issue of feminism and of womanhood in a very surreal and untraditional manner. She does not dither to deal with sex, which is called a “taboo subject”. She confesses:

> It is important for women to talk about it. Our mother endured it silently because it was a taboo subject. Nobody was interested in woman’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 (Ibid: 09)

In fact the novels of Shobha De fascinate “both men and women from sixteen to ninety” (09) Ramchandran has rightly stated, “You may love her or hate her, but it is difficult to ignore.” (09)
In the novel *Sisters* we encounter a woman who struggles against restrictions of being a woman and finally succeeds in asserting her self-identity. Mikki Hiralal is the central character in this novel. At the time when the novel begins we come to know that Mikki has to return to India from America after the untimely death of her parents in an air crash. She comes to Bombay to take charge of her father’s industries known as the Hiralal Industries, which are on the threshold of bankruptcy. The reasons for the virtual collapse of Hiralal Industries are still unknown to Mikki. According to a press version it was Mikki’s father’s involvement in multi-crore scandals and his financial debt to the tune of eighty crores which resulted in the unpredicted business loss:

The report had talked about her father being involved in a multi-crore scandal. It mentioned a deal that had scoured and money that he was unable to payback… Or had he become victim of his own ambitions in the end? (De, Shobha: 1992:104-105)

Mikki decides not to bother herself with these suppositions. She wants to take things under her control. She is full of confidence on her father’s achievements and her trust in his success as fair and hard earned makes her strong. She takes up the challenge to revive the empire set by her father. She estimates that it’s not going to be an easy endeavor and will require her to be mentally, physically and emotionally strong. She wanted to take hold of the industries of her father which required lot of attention. Restoration of industries was the main target of Mikki and for this she was ready to undergo any provisional pains and experiment to come out successfully. In the initial stages of the novel, Mikki is portrayed as a representative of modern woman, a woman of Shobha De, who can shoulder any responsibility. Mikki is not only positive about her inner strength
but also very sure that she will achieve what she is aiming for. Mikki does not fear the social constraints that are imposed upon a woman who dares to undertake any untraditional task. She is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt and for this purpose, along with her strong will power she needed heavy loads of finance. As most of the earnings of her father has been lost the only option she has is pooling in money from outside sources. In no time it is clear that the people who were associated with her father before the entire episode of bankruptcy are no longer ready to extend their hand in offering Mikki support. She is advised by Shanay, her cousin to borrow money from her fiancée Navin. Mikki finds the advice feasible and approaches Navin with a hope to retrieve father’s industries but it takes her no time to realize that Navin is a puppet in his mother’s hands. Navin tries to persuade Mikki to give up on this hopeless endeavor on different pretexts. Mikki is shocked and concludes that Navin lacks self-respect. She decides to walk out of Navin’s life to make a strong move.

3.2.3 Mikki’s Decision to Call of her Engagement: A Sign of Strong Self Will of a Modern Woman:

It is truly said that it is impossible for anyone to give up the first love, especially in the case of love nurturing into a relationship. Navin is the first person who comes in the life of Mikki. He comes very close to Mikki and Mikki “allowed him to hold her in his arms and kiss her” (63) but Mikki does not allow him to go any further. She cries, “stop it.” (63) And then Navin stopped it and pretends as if he did not intend to do anything. Navin tells her that it was just a test of her virginity and that she has passed that test, Navin tells her:
Don’t worry … I’m not going to rape you. I’ll wait. This was just a test. I’d heard you were quite a fast babe… Now, I can go home and tell my mother to announce our engagement. (63)

Very soon, their engagement is solemnized. Only after the formal engagement Navin’s mother starts exerting her dominance as a mother-in-law and smears her control on Nisha. She constantly wants to be in touch of her and regularly calls her. Calling Nisha each morning becomes a routine for her. Nisha always believed in her independence and privacy. Navin’s mother used to call on every morning to Mikki’s house. Exasperated, Mikki made a objection and complained to Navin but Navin took it casually and wavered it away saying, “Mother-in-law problems already” (70)

But Mikki was not to be appeased so easily, she tries to probe in the attitude of Navin towards their relationship. She wanted to test his seriousness towards their relationship. She finds that Navin is a playboy and a mumma’s baby. The childish attitude of Navin develops a kind of threat in the mind of Mikki and she feels insecure with the thought of spending the rest of her life with Navin. She concludes that her marriage with Navin would turn into a very unhealthy one and he, as a partner, would prove a challenge for the job, she was going to take up. Mikki began to dread her decision and thus she decided to break off the engagement. The engagement is broken.

Shobha De mouldsMikki with very strong determination and decisive nature. She is a foil to Anjali who is always craving for sexual pleasures. Normally, Shobha De’s women are courageous and are avoid using sex as diplomatic tool, a planned strategy to gain social and financial benefits. Generally, a strong woman looks merely for a life-time partnership. Mikki is a very strong woman; she is very different from the ordinary
woman. After her father’s death she carries herself with complete self-determination, guarding herself from every small and big trial. She becomes the threshold of every aspect of her life be it her personal or the business. She is not a girl who could be distorted or erroneous. Raman kaka one of her father’s inmates and a confidante of her father’s business complexities, suggests to her that he be consulted in all her decisions about business transactions but Mikki refuses to be dictated by him. It is Mikki who holds the key to decisions and gets an obvious victory as she emphatically declares:

Thank you for your advice, Raman kaka, I appreciate and value your words. But I’d like you to hear a few of mine now. I can’t change my sex, unfortunately… This is going to be my show and I intend running it on my terms. (30-31)

Mikki is not emotional, downcast or weak, like traditional Indian woman. On the contrary, she is assertive, pragmatic and strong. Here, Mikki challenges the usual orthodox vision of the society. She is a tough woman who easily and without any sense of guilt breaks off her engagement with Navin who fails to respond to her wish.

In fact, She’d always been such a difficult girl. Mikki was a difficult girl to be pleased or to be duped. Ramanbhai had tried his level best to trick her into testing him but this could not be done. He even tried to black-mail her emotionally by addressing her as, “Beti” he said deliberately, “I appreciate your method of trying to start at the bottom and I agree it is the best way to understand any business.”(30)

But Mikki is not flattered by these buttering. Time and again she stands against all odds. Ramanbhai discouraged her by saying that it would not be possible for her to undertake the revival of the industries because she was not a male. Ramanbhai says:
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 good husband – that is all. (30)

But Mikki acted indifferently to his baseless concerns and advices. She was firm on her decision to carry her plans forward, as she was very buoyant and ready to accept any challenges to fulfill her dreams. Her intangible strength and regularity in her constant move towards success leads us to believe that Mikki is truly a post-modern woman. According to Shobha De, perhaps, women have to assert their independence in order to claim their identity in the society. K. K. Sinha has rightly opined that Shobha De….

stands for equal and normal treatment to the woman in this hurly-burly world of ours. [...] She has an agenda, and she will work towards it single mindedly and even alone if need be.

(Sinha,K.K.:2001: 89-90)

Ramanbhai characterizes the typical male representing a regular patriarchal society who thinks that it is their birth right to teach women her duties and responsibilities. He cunningly advises Mikki:

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. (30)
But Mikki remained unmoved and least effected far from getting influenced because she belongs to the kind of women who, “play for very high stakes and are driven by ambition, lust, greed and hate.” (60)

She summarily rejects Ramankaka’s advice and says;

I’m determined not to let the companies go by default. I will learn whatever I have to and I will hire who ever I think fit. But before I set about doing that, I need facts and figures. And I’m depending on you to give them to me. (31)

The desire for success, the confidence to achieve, the ambition to grow, and the greed to carry on and the level of hatred for the ones who hinders her growth, present in the character of Mikki make her an untraditional woman. It is on this ground that the novel has been called Indian in names and setting and American in inspiration. A critic, Sarbani Sen has rightly commented that:

Shobha De is producing a desi version of an American best-seller where the Indian ambience is merely an exoticising on an unmistakably American cake. (Sen, Sarbani: 2000: 63)

Finally Ramanbhai yields to the assertive nature of Mikki. He accepts the fact that Mikki cannot be diverted from her goal. Very meekly and softly he confesses; “Mikki... sorry, Madam... you are your father’s daughter.” (31) For Ramanbhai Mikki is decidedly the new woman who has armed herself to face the world, which is “full of sharks” (31) Mikki is very tactful in propitiating males also. She says to Ramankaka: “I’m so glad that I have you on my side.” (31)
Mikki’s experiences in America and her first hand observation of the free outlook of western woman teaches her how to win the challenges of the corporate world and the world full of opponents. She has learned about the diabolic nature of human and as such she understood the in and out of such creatures and how to keep them under control. With sheer determination, she chocks the policies for her future actions. She knows very well that annoying people close to her would create a lot of problem to her. That is why she does not displease Shanay, a cousin of hers. Shanay’s mother Anjanaben calls Mikki, “pretty and spoilt.” (31) She strongly desires that Shanay is married to Mikki but Shanay is afraid and fearful of Mikki. In the novels of Shobha De, men are depicted as hesitant, coward and fearful. Shanay is inducted into Hiralal Industries by Mikki. His induction is despised by most of the workers and particularly by Ramanbhai. Mikki is very tactful as she reappoints Shanay in the industry not to help him but to help her. She asks him to keep a close watch over the activities of people which were seriously affecting the prosperity and the growth of industries. Shanay works very sincerely for Mikki not for getting her hand in marriage because he knew, “His love for his beautiful cousin was doomed.” (42)

On the contrary, as discussed earlier, Shanay is gifted with intellectual qualities but lacks a drive to take big decisions. He is happy working for Mikki and his aim is to please her with the duties she ask him to fulfill. Here we are exposed to two types of characters: one a man who is intellectually strong but doesn’t believe in himself so works under another person. Second we have a woman who is intellectually empowered and intensely self-motivated so she commands. Shanay brings her the report of the alleged murder of her father, which is not relied upon by Mikki. Mikki’s unique character is manifest in the fact
that she does not trust in the surface reality. She wants to go deeper into the matter and only after thorough verification and analysis; she understands the truthfulness of the matter. She advises Shanay to go deeper into the reports of her father’s death. She says:

Listen Shanay, I want you to report everything you hear to me, no matter how trivial it seems to you. Every, rumour every bit of gossip, every little story. Find out, where it starts, follow it up. If necessary, let’s hire professionals. I want to get to the bottom of this. Why would anybody have wished to kill my father? (43)

Mikki’s wittiness, her willingness to experiment and her prudence in her relationship with the opposite sex reminds us of the immortal, Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Elizabeth acts so prudently that without knowing the nature and the real character of men, she does not bring him closer to her. It takes for her a long time to befriend Darcy only for this reason.

Mikki has less than twenty days to celebrate her twentieth birthday, “Twentieth birth day was just three months away” (09) and at this immature and tender age she takes up the challenge imposed upon her by destiny and takes guard of the dwindling empire and the dying industries of her father.

Life takes on her unguarded. She was leading a carefree and easy life in America. She, in reality was unprepared for any responsibility that can deprive her of her personal freedom. She always kept her away from her father’s business and her hometown too as she wanted to enjoy her life. Her initial aversion to the corporate business is mainly due
to her fear of losing the colorful life in America where she has had her first test of life.

The narrator tells:

Given the choice, Mikki wanted this nightmare to end now. Her parents were dead. There was nobody she cared for and nobody cared for her… Her life in India… was over.(9)

Mikki is a typical woman character created by Shobha De. She represents De’s vision of how a woman ought to be. Mikki hardly appears to nurture any sentimentalism at the death of both her parents. In the beginning itself, she seems to prefer her wish and taste to the social convention. Her hatred for any show of sentimentalism is apparent to us as she refuses to wear white coloured clothes at her parent’s mourning and immediately appear to have the faith of the author who seems to be on her side: “Mikki hated white. God, she hated it” (01) she snubs Gangubai for wailing loudly and sounds matter of fact when she says: “Gangubai please stop that, what has happened”. (02) When Gangubai tries to stir emotions in her by sympathizing in the words. “Baby… God has dealt you a severe blow: You are orphaned…. What worse fate can a child suffer?” (02) She appears rather stern and orders her, “Go and get me a coffee.”(03)

Mikki hardly seems to have been shocked by the tragic death of her parents in a plane crash. She looks focused and controlled: She refuses to believe that she is a child and orphaned in the real sense of the word. She sounds rather nonchalant as she concludes: “Her father has been quite a man… quite a bastard too.” (03)

In the beginning itself, therefore, Shobha De makes her intentions clear. Her women are not going to be emotional, subdued and weak ladies of manners. On the contrary, they are
to be assertive, pragmatic and strong. As the action of the novel unfolds, both these girls continue to indulge in their single-minded pursuit which is to lead a life of luxury, wealth, comfort and pleasure, a perception quite alien to those women who seek a heavenly bliss in the domestic duties and prefer to revel in a spiritual illusion rather than chasing a material reality. Shobha De’s woman, “symbolize the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality that characterized modern age.” (Swain, 133)

In *Sisters* too, the moment we look at Mikki and Alisha we know that these girls won’t lead an existence the circumference of which the others’ especially males, decide. Both Alisha and Mikki refuse to sulk and appear subdued in order to look sober and domesticated. The death of their father, in Mikki’s case both the parents, does not seem to matter much to them as they want to get down to their business sooner than the society expects them to do. Mikki seems desperate to get back to America to resume her interrupted semester while Alisha appears determined to grab the huge fortune that her father has so unexpectedly left to her. Both these girls appear too much self-centered and preoccupied to waste their time mourning their father’s death. Shobha De invests them with the usual male feelings of ambition and purpose and sets on to open her novel in a frank manner. At the very outset we know that the author is going to write from the point of view of these girls.

The focus of the action does not deviate much from these two girls as Shobha De pursues their explorations through the changes of life. The author first concentrates on Mikki who seems to be a poised, levelheaded, strong and mature girl. She takes over the intricacies of the business from her dead father and begins to plough her way through the business
world difficulties. When she takes charge of her business, she intends to run it on her own terms and is against necessary patronizing.

Mikki does not like to be patronized. She is bold and confident. Anjanaben calls her a difficult girl. She is difficult not because she does not listen to anyone or because she has a strong ego but because she challenges the usual orthodox vision of a society that treats a girl as mere shadow of the male: Mikki attempts to undo this image of woman and looks almost threatening to treat severely if received with the usual complacency and an air of superiority by her male officials surrounded mostly by males in her business empire, Mikki standstill tough, aloof and not dependent and yet successful. She hardly regrets her sex and firmly believes in herself, her capability to select the desired and discard undesirable. In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is usually the male who decides guides and directs the female but Shobha De’s woman are of different sort. They have the power to resist, oppose and even hit back those who attempt to subdue them. Mikki is projected to be a girl possessing her own intellect, will and intention. She has her own ideas and firmly believes in action. She seems keen to assert her feminine, yet a strong individualistic identity in a habitually male-dominated society. Through the intentions of a tough-minded and levelheaded Mikki, we see the design of the author who wants her females to be not just the subordinated counterfoils of their male companions. She intends them to be free and completely self-reliant ladies having an open and free existence. However, if Mikki expresses a notion that clearly is an aspect of her feministic views that are assertive, the ideas of Alisha are somewhat stunningly blatant and violent.

In selection of a life-partner i.e. the husband, Mikki is very prudent and tactful. She finds Navin as not a suitable, “Husband material.” Navin asks Mikki to express her opinion
about the marriage, “I was going to ask you to marry me.” (53) Mikki replies very indirectly in such a way that Navin is not hurt:

I’m sorry, Navin. This is so unexpected. I don’t know what to say.

Or how to react. I’m really not ready for marriage. I like you. And at this point, I’d rather be with you than anybody else. But marriage?

It’s too soon after… you know… after the tragedy. I need time…

(53)

Prolonging the decision is another way of rejection or denial. Thus Mikki calls off her relationship with Navin. Mikki is attracted towards Binny and makes up her mind to marry him. Like Asha Rani of *Starry Nights*; Mikki too shows a weakness of becoming emotional like Asha Rani who sacrifices herself for Akshay Arora, though in return she gets only abuses and humiliation. Asha Rani continues with her love with him and is unable to change her mind. Similarly, Mikki develops a strong attachment towards Binny; her love is answered by Binny in the form of insult and abuse. He humiliates her and beats her, yet Mikki does not forget him. Binny appears to be very straightforward initially, he tells Mikki “You are a woman after my own heart. No wasting time, no wasting words. To the point.” (56)

These words appeal to Mikki who consents to marry him even after Binny has put two strong conditions for marriage:

I’m prepared to take Hiralal Industries with all its current liabilities on two conditions. The first - that you marry me. The second – that you relinquish complete rights in all your father’s affairs to me- and
that includes properties and any of her assets my lawyers will come up with. (56)

Binny addresses her as “princess” (56) which was enough to flatter Mikki and wins her heart. Mikki decides to marry him. She goes in for a middle-aged Binny. What attracts her to him is his uncanny aggressive manner. It is he who helps Mikki learns about the other side of her personality. Amy, an old hand and friend of Mikki, Says:

May be he lacks finesse… refinement… nevertheless Malhotra type men are better… an older man…. an experienced one. And together you’d make quite a team. (58)

Despite being warned Mikki marries Binny. It is indeed surprising to note that unlike Shobha De’s other women heroines who usually tend to free themselves from the clutches of married life. Mikki consciously gets into wedlock she sacrifices her long nourished freedom and dream of handling her father’s industries and bargains a marriage for a lifetime torture and disrespect. She is shown as a person with no adversity to the institution of man and wife. She is looking for a healthy relationship in which both husband and wife are individuals and enjoy complete respect and freedom. She finds Binny to be progressive and more acceptable of her modern thinking.

In the initial days of their marriage, Binny appears to be an ideal soulmate. All attentive and caring towards Mikki, she too returns attention with total dedication. She enjoys his extensive attentiveness and experienced approach in teaching her the style of living. In his company Mikki finds a new self. She loves herself more, discovering the hidden aspects of her own sexuality which she hadn’t guessed existed. Under his guidance, she
not only gets an insight into her real ‘self’ but also feels a sense of security. Thus she prides herself on being his wife. The narrator tells:

She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon. If this was what her man wanted, if this was what made him happy, should give it to him. She would give him happy, should give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her body, her mind and her soul. She was in love with him. And he was finally hers. (109)

Mikki, somewhere throughout her journey of making a mark desired for arms which could hold her, caress her, love her and make her special, she finds these longings fulfilled when Binny was on her side. Binny made her feel very weak very fragile and totally dependent on him. Mikki in her blinded love and lust for Binny doesn’t realize that she was losing herself to this man. She never once suspects any ill play from Binny but slowly and silently it is unfolded that Binny is no exception. He too is looking total submission from his wife, a complete control on her body, her mind and her property. In his extremely talented and modern wife he desires for the characteristic of a traditional woman, which adds to the superiority of man and consequent exploitation of woman Mikki’s honeymoon with Binny ends up in a fiasco. Binny is a wolf in the garb of a man. He is a womanizer. She is involved with more women then files in his office. He already has a family, an illegitimate one and his marriage with Mikki is only to keep up his image in the high profile society. One who has known Mikki closely would have expected Mikki to null the marriage and expose Binny to the world but strangely enough, Mikki, having learnt this remains silent. She says that she does not care for his past life. What is
past for her but the day to day growing indifference of Binny towards her after the earlier showers of total affection makes her uneasy. She cannot tolerate Binny’s indifference to her, except for a few moments when “he poured falcon of joy on her limbs.”(108)

3.2.4 The Death of Love and Womanhood: The Rise of the Fallen Angel’s:

Binny, the fallen angel, we can see him now seems to have married Mikki as a target and not as a woman of flesh and blood. Her life with him becomes an absolute hell. He takes Mikki as an object and thus begins the process of her dehumanization. According to his first condition to marry Mikki Binny had already taken control of Mikki’s life and movement. By transferring all her property in his name Binny wanted to weaken Mikki’s financial position and turn her into a dependent ordinary housewife. Mikki has put full faith in when all her property is transferred to Binny, as she was not looking for a counterpart; she was looking for a companion. But Binny turns into a male chauvinistic pig. Besides, he marries Mikki as an object and a second option of sexual fulfillment. She is denied motherhood for she has to keep always fit for him. Being a representative of the oppressive system, Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner both in life and business. He is characteristically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife:

> Who stays at home and looks after me… Our woman stays at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfill their husbands every need and look good when their men get home in the evening.

> No office going. (109)

This is exactly what puts Mikki off but as she is conscious of her precarious condition, she pleads with him. “I can look after you and look after at least a part of the business.
We would work together…. I won’t have to wait hours to see you.” (109) But with strong manly pride Binny, her husband rejected her proposal and said, “Be my slave.” (109)

3.2.5 Exposing the True Colors of Chauvinism of the Post Modern Era: Binny’s Character a Portrait of Male Ego and Prejudice:

This is how woman are treated after they are bound together with men by marriage-knot. They are denied what is known as freedom and choice. They have to act like slaves to their husbands. Mikki’s situation in the novel throws light on the harsh realities of the patriarchal society. It also hints at the growing awareness among the woman who begin to rise from the eternal slumber. Mikki’s continual protest with Binny results from her innate desire for freedom. This kind of objectification of woman and her subjugation to men angers Shobha De that is why she detests the institution of marriage. Before marriage all the males behave like slaves to their prospective wives. Binny addresses Mikki as “my princess”, but after marriage, he orders her “be my slave.” (109) And Binny justifies this position of woman on the ground that the real position of woman is in the home and not outside. Before marriage, Binny behaves like a very old slave of Mikki and he embraces her in office, during office hours saying. “This is like a dream comes true.”(94)

He hugged her passionately as if a small boy hugs his newly purchased toys. Mikki was like a toy to him. Binny says after passionately embracing her, “This has been my fantasy from the day I saw you”(94) and he continued:

I wanted to take you right here on my table…. not on a holiday…

and not after office hours…. but bang in the middle of a hectic work
day, with my secretary buzzing the intercom and people waiting to see me. (94)

It is very surprising and shocking indeed that Mikki most unwillingly gives up everything that belonged to her:

I don’t want to go through with this. I want my room, my home. I don’t want to marry Binny. Any…. do something. Ring him up… call it off I don’t care how it’ll look. (105)

Mikki marries Binny and finally surrenders to him everything that belonged to her. But Mikki is treated by Binny simply as an object of sex. He makes love to her, in all the manners known to him.

His expertise and imagination were boundless as he excited her in a hundred different ways’ touching, licking, nibbling, sucking... He turned her over, he stood her up, he had her on all fours, and he even had her upside down with blood rushing in anguish into her head. It was unreal, pleasurable, but also a little frightening. (108)

*Sisters* shows how woman are victims of male-passions. Seth Hiralal, a married man, had raped his watchman’s wife who died in forced abortion. He made Sapna pregnant and her inside was damaged in abortion. Alisha is his Daughter from his kept, Leelaben. Binny Malhotra has a mistress and children but he marries Mikki and forces her to go for abortion otherwise he will divorce her. Instead of giving independence and individuality, he wants to reduce her to a beautiful rubber-woman. Mikki disagrees to her husband’s concept of marriage:
No, it isn’t,” Mikki said, her voice rising, at least it is not the sort of marriage I am looking for. I thought we’d be doing things together enjoying life. Now a day I get to see you only at parties. “Is not that funny? (115)

Mikki is too helpless to assert her position and fight male aggressiveness. “Her marriage is a failure”, she says to Amy, “I wanted someone with whom I could share my life. Is that such an impossible expectation?” (119)

Shobha De also exposes urban educated woman who takes man as play things. Alisha has sexual meeting with Navin, knowing him to be engaged with Mikki once. Her action is an act of revenge towards her sister rather than any love. Her relationship for Dr. Kurien who attends on her in the hospital is purely physical as the doctor has his wife and children. The doctor’s observations to Alisha speak of Shobha De’s critical concept of urban woman;

For woman like you—men are playing things, today you want to break up my marriage. Tomorrow you will get bored and move on to some other man. Where will that leave me? (164)

Shobha De exposes male aggressiveness but her women are weak and subservient. Really it is surprising why she, a woman novelist, has not created bold and assertive woman like Shashi Deshpande’s Jaya in That Long Silence, fighting for individuality and equality. All her women Mikki, Alisha, Leelaben, Urmila and Sapana belong to the urban world but they are unable to fight against being playthings or sex images. When Amy provokes
Mikki to assert her self-respect the latter is unwilling to cross the boundary of a typical traditional Indian Woman. She exposes her pathetic helplessness when she says;

He (her husband) is like a god to me I do not care who he sleeps with. All I care is that I am his wife and that he comes home to me

(124)

Shashi Deshpande’s Jaya represents the image of a wife yoked to her husband. Shobha De fails to articulate woman’s anger against men, which gives a disappointing message in the novel written after forty-five years of independence.

Ironically, Mikki never thinks of a life beyond marital bounds. It is her dream to be both an ideal wife and responsible social being that gives a novel 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 termed as unethical acts that is breaking the marriage oaths or indulging in extra-marital relations. Shobha De observes;

It is not enough to have mind of your own, if you don’t have income to match… with this economic freedom has come assertiveness, confidence and refusal to be treated as doormats

(Ramchandran, Janaki: 1997: 26)

Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. Although she fails to find in Binny a man with whom she could share her life, Mikki is “willing to compromise her own life if it meant he’d notice her, acknowledge her existence.” (140)
Her dream to enjoy the fruit of marital life is shattered when Binny suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home, she pleads innocence and tells him, “Binny… I love you. Only you... I can’t live without you.”(141)

Mikki is turned out of house by her husband on a false charge of adultery. The reason, she has taken a cooking course from a male French cook, Lucio in her husband’s absence. Even at this stage she is shy of fighting for her right and is afraid of any type of scandal.

In fact, her disillusionment with Binny is total when he goes in for divorce. All her efforts to live with him fail. Mikki is determined to retain her industries with which she identifies herself. However long before, she does anything, she again finds herself in the saddle, when Binny along with his legitimate family meets his death. Mikki is a changed woman now her experience with Binny gives her an insight into her ‘being’ as a woman and an individual. The transformation of Mikki from a mere social butterfly to a mature woman and to a kindly mother figure is apparent when she turns her attention towards her estranged sister.

Shobha De’s working class woman, however, is stronger than educated and rich urban ones. Tarini, a middle class working-woman at Bhavana’s office, asserts her love for Shashi despite her husband and children. Her statement to Mikki is a bitter commentary on urban women:

You think only rich socialites are entitled to other relationships?

Well, let me tell you that the man I’m involved with is not rich or powerful like your husband or like any of the other men... of
courses, he is married. But so what? But he is honest principled
committed to his case. (145)

Tarini justifies “other relationships” and asserts the right of a woman to have her own
identity and individuality. She says to Mikki in the natural frankness,

It is not only glamorous, beautiful woman who have affairs, even an
ordinary woman like me sometimes find someone who loves her,
cares for her, wants to spend life with her. (146)

Mikki is weaker than even a slum-dweller woman who, being beaten by her drunken
husband comes to the lawyer, Bhavana for justice.

Another important aspect of Shobha De’s urban world is the disinteresting parent-child
relationship. While Leelaben is sinking in the hospital, her daughter Alisha who has
suddenly become rich is drinking and dancing with Navin in a nightclub. She has enough
money to spend on her mother’s treatment but no time to share her pain. Dr. Kurien’s
well-meaning advice to Alisha is a testimony to what parents expect from their children:

I hope you don’t mind saying this, but what she needs is your
time…. and even more importantly your love. There is nothing
wrong with her physically… she requires reassurance and
understanding. She is a lovely lady. And an insecure one she has
been feeling extremely rejected and unloved. (129)

Alisha appears as an angry young woman. Her reaction to the news of Seth Hiralal’s
death survived by his only daughter, Mikki, shakes her terribly. Her own identity as
another daughter of Seth Hiralal seems to be lost in this news. Her questions “And what about me? What am I? A puppy? A kitten? A pet?” (3)

Speak of her search for individual identity, she cannot tolerate being lost. She resolves to fight for her-self and her share in her father’s business and regards Mikki as her enemy number one. The contrast between these two sisters gives a dramatic touch to the narrative. For Alisha, money gives identity and is important than any human relations. To Mikki, blood relations are more valuable than wealth. She is apologetic and reconciliatory in her approach to her step-sister. Alisha is rough, abusive and at war with Mikki who begs for her help as she feels lonely and helpless and wants to help her financially. Alisha distrusts her, hates her “fucking charity” and calls her “bitch”. The contrast between these two sisters is the most important aspects of the growth of the plot of the novel.

Mikki wins over her stepsister Alisha by her sincere love and service when the latter is hospitalized and needs blood. Blood-relationship triumphs over hatred, trust wins over mistrust. “The two sisters held each other close and cried the lost years away.” (161)

Alisha’s initial annoyance with her father soon turns into decisive rebellion as she sets out to level the score with her opponents. In her fury, she moves with strong feeling of hatred in her heart for her dead father and his legitimate daughter, who got without a stir all that Alisha could not master with toil. Alisha’s animosity continues to prod her. She thinks and behaves wildly; mixes with her lover for a free sexual relationship and torments Mikki each time. The latter tries to strike a chord of harmony between them. She hates Mikki, her father and society. She is ferocious at the double standard of the society, which discriminates the legitimate from the illegitimate, all, the more selfishly.
She is cross at the injustice and social hypocrisy. To avenge her humiliation, she chooses a subtle way. She beds with a former fiancée of Mikki and believes to have tortured her by having sex with him. She is shown to be doing this so earnestly because, “her attraction was on different level altogether. She wanted him only because Mikki had him.” (95)

Though Alisha seems to do it to avenge Mikki, she voices the author’s own desire of liberation for women in sexual matters. Alisha is shown having sex with different men. She shrugs aside the sexual conventionality and runs after the desire of body without any social or moral inhibitions. There are extensive scenes of her sexual encounter with Navin. Though apparently she seems to think whether Mikki did the same things with Navin as she copulates with him, Shobha De also seems to direct us to this part of her silent, subtle revenge, as she seems to support our feelings for her. Alisha does this, “to obliterate any memory Navin might have retained of his love making with the women she hated.” (123)

However, these free sexual encounters, where Alisha seems to initiate, participate and enjoy the sexual acrobatics with Navin, look like a scornful laughter of the author herself who wants to shock the orthodox reader with the meticulous, graphic details of these physical unions of Alisha and Navin. One recalls her admission of having a hidden agenda she explained in the “Hard talk” on BBC on 19 January 1999 as she said, “I don’t know why there is so much of noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex.” and that by projecting sex in such graphic details she wanted to jolt the society in a way. Alisha’s feelings of sexual gratification continue to sway her from Navin to Dr. Kurien. It becomes almost ridiculous the way Dr. Kurien pleads with her to let him free of a
physical relation with her. He blurts out his feelings of disapproval for her incessant sexual approach. Though Dr. Kurien succeeds in putting off the idea of marriage with her but has to compromise to the long, uninterrupted love making in the afternoons. And whenever he gets late in turning up from his clinic, Alisha feels furious and shouts at him as Dr. Kurien thus, “wasted more than forty-five minutes of their precious time together.” (185)

She is extremely possessive of him and is pained to see him pick up his wrist watch a sight of his departure after their love making. It seems, she can never be satisfied of having had enough sex. In an arousing scene that follows, Dr. Kurien expresses a similar idea as he blurts while having sex with her:

All the rich women are the same – you want more all the time
nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all… it’s free. (186)

Dr. Kurien’s frantically brutal sexual attack on Alisha sums up his frustration with her as she seems to have an insatiable sexual instinct. This frank outlook for sex in Alisha continues till the end of the novel and she continues to pursue males for their physical gratification. Even the last scene of the novel ends on a meaningful humorous warning by her to the bachelors who pay no attention to her and Mikki:

One of you guys had better watch out. Your bachelor days are numbered. It’s all over for you now. Alluring Alisha is on the prowl.

(222)

The word ‘prowl’ signifies her position of a tigress that is out to victimize another of her preys. This is how Alisha, one of the two most important characters of sisters, is
determined to smash the traditional image of woman and is hostile towards a patriarchal male culture. She approaches her business dauntlessly and indulges in free sex fearlessly using man as a plaything or an instrument wherever required.

It is not only Alisha, but her sister Mikki too, who establishes herself as an assertive, domineering, focused and sexually frank lady during the course of the novel, *Sisters*. She quickly begins to enter her father’s business shoes almost successfully. Simultaneously, she begins to accept the demands of her flesh and recognizes a feminine sensibility in herself. She successfully flirts with Shanay who as cherishing dreams of hopeless dream but still fails to get her out of his system.

She proves out to be a tough woman and when Navin, her fiancé, fails to respond to her wishes as he fails to bolster the sagging Hiralal Industries, she breaks off her engagement with him. In fact, she is also troubled by his mother who tries to use Mikki as a pawn. The most hurting moment comes when Navin’s mother begins to show her feelings of sympathy saying: “Bachchi hai. She is young and new to all this. We must encourage her, now that she has joined business community.” (81)

It is Mikki who buries all the ill-notions and initiates the move to reconcile with her sister, Alisha. With the initial resistance from Alisha, she is successful in bridging the indifferences and burying them. Mikki is a realist, a practical person and an out and out feminist. She is not the kind of woman who is content to live a selfish and egotistic life. It is this nature of Mikki, which inspires her to go to attend the funeral of Binny Malhotra. Binny Malhotra along with his mistress Urmi and children dies in a car accident. Suspense grows dense with telephone calls to Mikki disclosing her husband’s death, a case of conspiracy and sabotage and that her life too is in danger. Ramanbhai confuses
her by suspecting Shanay’s hands in her husband’s death. Mikki still relies upon him and begs for his help in her confused state. But to her utter shock, she discovers Ramanbhai to be the real villain. Finding her lonely and helpless, sure of her death in the hands of watchman, Bahadur Singh, he discloses how he has been instrumental in the death of her parents and husband. Bahadur Singh employed to kill Mikki and take revenge for his wife’s death demands ‘daru’ from Ramanbhai, loses his patience and strikes him with a crowbar. Meanwhile, Shanay comes with police and Ramanbhai is arrested. While Mikki is in the hospital for the treatment of her shock and bruises, Alisha serves her with love and care. Once more the two sisters are united in love. The images of violence and death are replaced by those of beauty, union and life.

Shobha De ends her novel on the age old tradition of leaving her readers on a happy and positive note with an extended epilogue, which marks the positive and poetic ending of sisters. The readers feel optimistic at the end of the novel as they are hopeful that there will be color and music in the life of Mikki and Alisha. Here they look on these sisters as representative of all women in general. The variable experiences of Mikki and Alisha, the trials in their life and their final decision to live life on their terms turn them into ideals. While in the hospital Mikki is diagnosed to be suffering from T. B. Alisha has been a drug addict. Both decide to take on a journey to London. Their journey from one place to another is showcased as a move from the past to the future; it is a kind of salvation from the evils of corrupt business world into a new world. It is for a complete change and a new beginning. In the lounge, Mikki and Alisha now symbol of life and brightness are going to London by the same flight. They have buried the bygones and what has to come is more than welcomed as they have a fresh realization of their inner strength and
combined caliber. While picking champagne glasses, Alisha with a twinkle in her eyes, says, “I had marriage in mind.” To which Mikki replies, “so did I.” Alisha chooses one of the two. Mikki smiles and looks out of the window at the twilight sky outside:

She spotted the lone everything star. Mikki quickly made a wish. A wish she knows was going to come true, finally. (222)

But the marriage is not solemnized, as the two men are still to give their consent for it. Again the novelist puts back the reader’s faith in man and woman relationship.
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