CHAPTER – IV

THE IMAGE OF LIBERATED AND EMANCIPATED NEW WOMAN

At present, rapid changes are taking place in the socio-cultural and moral values and norms of the society. They were geared up in the last decade of 20th century. Being a novelists of Post-Independence, Shobha De has dealt with contemporary problems. Her first novel Socialite Evenings (1989) highlights the important aspects of existence and survival of women in high class society of India. In fact, the entire fictional world of Shobha De is dominated by the women characters whereas the male characters are marginalised. They exist only as supporters and performers of secondary roles. Since there is an emphasis on women, men appear to be insignificant. Everywhere women are presented as superior to their male counterparts. In other words, it is the woman in Shobha De’s works who holds all the trump cards. She is a manipulator whose clever strategy looks beyond the male comprehension. She can easily defeat and outplay all her male counterparts. In this respect, Shobha De’s woman is a New Indian Woman.
In 1960’s with the rise of Feminism, there emerged the New Woman, who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. This New Woman is conscious, confident and sometimes even aggressive. To acquire a new identity she is seen dealing with the world around on her own terms. She occupies the centre and has got rid of her position of the “other”. She has become aware of her destination, that is, to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs imposed on her by the male-dominated society. Becoming conscious of her own rights, she has started a fight, of course, the fight is not going to be easy and short-lived since it is against the human elements like ego, greed, ambition and selfishness. So far, the women are looked at as man’s privilege and they have also accepted it without protest. But the modern women have realized the unjust nature of such an attitude and therefore, they have started thinking on different lines. De shows an important shift in the position of her women who are autonomous. They do not depend for their survival on their fathers, husbands or sons. On the other hand, they have required strength to face life with all its ups and downs. They are assertive, practical and strong. They fall into the category of the New Woman who solves her problems herself. It is on the basis of the authentic depiction of women in her novels Shobha De is
slowly acknowledged as one of the pioneers in the portrayal of the New Indian Woman in her fiction.

As a feminist Shobha De projects the ideas of liberating woman through self-realization and the quest for self-identity. Shobha De believes that the woman has to be aware of her own identity as a human being and should think for herself. Woman should be an independent identity and entity by being aware of the choices open to her. In Socialite Evenings, Karuna wants to move out of her middle-class background. Her attitude towards dress and manners is also defiant. Like other women in the novel such as Anjali and Ritu, Karuna too has obsession with marriage but she doesn’t want children. After marriage immediately she discovers that she is trapped into a meaningless marriage devoid of pleasure. Karuna is married to the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. Though he is not a villain he is an average Indian husband. He is never intellectually and emotionally one with Karuna. Consequently, she gets bored with her husband. Her friend Anjali suggests that she should try an affair in order to overcome her boredom. Krish comes in her life. According to Karuna’s husband Krish is a married rake and so he warns Karuna not to get involved with him. But she is all the time planning to meet Krish. She wants to go to Venice with Krish which would surely be the turning point in
their relationship. Ritu, friend of Karuna, educates her regarding the rules laid down for adultery – “no calls on Sundays, no calls at home, letters to be destroyed immediately after reading, no presents” (163). But later, to her utter surprise Karuna finds that Krish is only an opportunist. He is not sincere and honest so their temporary extra-marital affair comes to an end. It does not reveal a true meaning of life. As a self-realized person, she comes to know that such affair proves to be an oasis in the desert. It does not bring any happiness to woman and therefore, though she is attracted to Girish and Ranbir, she refuses their offer because she doesn’t want to lose her individuality. She prefers to create her own authentic representation which gives her a sense of freedom. She gets ready to live her life on her own terms by rejecting the idea of getting married second time. Again when her husband tries to reconcile with her, she understands his duplicity and dishonesty and rejects him. Because of her disgusting and unfruitful experience she accepts singlehood status as an affirmation of her self: “I still resisted them. I suppose my real concerns were different. It wasn’t money or success I was looking forward to in my life at that point it was the freedom to do what I wanted” (265-266).

Karuna’s self-actualized portrayal reflects her longing to initiate and regulate her life on her own. Contrast to weak and
submissive traditional Indian woman, she is strong, courageous enough to get emancipated from orthodox role of women. She does not need the protection and umbrella of a male partner in her day-to-day routine. Right from her childhood she is above the limiting restrictions of an individual family. She is capable and strong enough to face any adverse situation. For instance, when her husband wants to break up their marriage, she is pregnant but she is not disheartened at all. Instead, she talks to her friend Anjali about the issue. They discuss the subject thoroughly related to getting rid of the child as early as possible so that Karuna once again would become free to lead her life the way she wants. Thus she intends to move out and make a life for herself. She no longer needs man’s attention. She keeps herself very cleverly at a safe distance from wolfish males such as Abe and Gul. Besides this, as a liberated and emancipated woman, she declines Girish’s offer of marriage and also remains unaffected by Varun’s threats. Varun’s association with politicians, journalists and underworld could not make her move from the path she has chosen.

As a matter of fact, Shobha De’s women easily outplay their male counterparts. The males are subdued and threatened by the self-assured and self-reliant females. Her women rebel against the traditional image of Indian women, whatever may be the field familial, social or business. According to K. K. Sinha (The
Commonwealth Review, IX.2 1997-1998 : 15), Shobha De “presents the confident, enterprising, ambitious, and individualistic new woman who demands attention, equality and peace; not on compromising terms but on terms at par with man...” Karuna’s husband is made to crawl at his divorced wife’s feet to come back to him, in spite of her violent extra-marital relationship with his friend, Krish. He pleaded her to stop her affair with Krish. It is he who begs her to be his wife again, after the divorce. But he is rejected and even humiliated by Karuna because he had been mean in his motives and dealings with her. After Karuna moved out of his house, he had phoned and offered her the following great package of help:

Look – let us be civil about this. I have thought over it, and there is no reason to sulk or accuse. My lawyers will be in touch with you next week. We have worked out a package. You can have your jewellery and all other personal belongings. In fact, come and pick them up any time you want to. We will figure out where you can live. I have identified a flat in Juhu – nothing grand. But you will like it .... My tax consultant is looking into a monthly maintenance scheme. You have your insurance policy, of course, and the income from shares and the other investments we made jointly. ... Oh – do you need any money? How are you for cash? Is your cheque

Karuna a modern New Woman, is independent in every way. She breaks the bonds of marriage and lands her feet firm into the profession of her choice that is modelling and independent journalistic essayist. She establishes herself in the highly competitive world and becomes emotionally and financially independent. Like Karuna, Anjali and Ritu are also presented as the tainted images of liberated and emancipated New Women devoid of any moral code and social responsibility. But he did not keep his promise, instead cheated her of the money he had promised her while getting the divorce papers signed by her.

All women presented in Socialite Evenings are attractive and self-assured. They are well aware of their own strengths and are also clever enough to hide their weaknesses. They are happy with wealth, and the pleasures which they could buy with money and the freedom. Moreover, the three major women characters in the novel – Karuna, Anjali and Ritu, reveal the dominant picaresque element. In fact, all the novels of De appear to be the modernised version of the 18th century picaresque fiction. The picaro in her fiction is a woman who wanders from place to place in search of more fulfilling experiences. For example, Anjali, a prominent Mumbai socialite discards the
traditional moral values and rises from middle-class to the high strata of society. She leaves behind her teenage daughter under her husband’s care which gives her too much freedom to flirt. Similarly, Karuna doesn’t want to have a baby, therefore, seeks an abortion when gets pregnant. In the process of establishing her identity, she gives divorce to her husband and takes up journalism as her career. She discards the traditional role of a wife and enjoys the extra-marital relationship with Krish. All this establishes her as a modern career-oriented woman who struggles and combats all the obstacles on her way to create her own independent identity. No one can deny the existence of such character because all the popular TV programmes and the suggestive advertisements project the image of such modern liberated women. These women are liberated in the sense that they often dare to step out of the confines of their homes, marriages and families. They stand for complete freedom to women from all types of patriarchal restraints. The husbands feel powerless and threatened by the strange and domineering position of their women. In the novel, for instance, we find Karuna’s husband accepting Winnie’s power. It is described in the following way by the novelist:

Winnie was out to screw him. Winnie was after his money. Winnie insulted his mother. Winnie had sacked his favourite servant. Winnie couldn’t cook. Winnie smoked too much... Winnie was rude to his relatives.
She is a very strange and powerful woman. I feel ashamed to admit this, but I am scared of her. I can’t do anything because I know she will destroy me. She has that power. (SE 254-256)

Shobha De realistically presents in her fiction the models of different types of women. These women are strong in character and bold enough to take decisions to survive in the patriarchal society. Moreover, De’s women are sexually liberated and are free thinking women. They can easily combine pleasure, career and marriage. Therefore, they seem to be perfect, bright and fearless companions to the modern young men. Furthermore, the readers of Shobha De’s fiction seem to be the people who have curiosity to know the life and behaviour of the modern rich people, particularly women in socialite circles. So, the images of women that appear in her fiction are often related to the showbiz people. In order to satisfy the taste of her readers who appear to live in a world of romance, Shobha De presents romantic images of women in her fiction. These highly ultra-modern women lead luxurious and glamorous life. They are economically independent and free from social and moral restrictions. Metaphorically speaking, the sexual taboos tumble like a pack of cards as and when her women walk.

Like Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, also has the theme of liberated woman. It depicts the modern woman’s struggle and search
for identity. Aasha Rani, a woman of bewitching beauty, “Sweetheart of the millions”, is the central character in this novel. She comes from the south-Indian middle-class surrounding but the moment she steps in the tinsel town of Mumbai, she becomes a liberated woman who lives for her own pleasures and knows no moral codes and value system. While she is a top star in film industry, she has an affair with Akshay Arora, in spite of the fact, that he is a married man. This period of her affair with Akshay is the worst and the most disappointing period in her life because she is beaten by Akshay many times and also humiliated by his wife Malini. It is ironical that while she can have sex with Akshay at will, she cannot have marriage with him. So after her betrayal by Akshay Arora, Aasha Rani suffers of boredom and loneliness. She wanted to lead a normal life which was possible only outside the world of films. She longs for marriage. It is at this stage, Abhijit Mehra, enters in her life. He is very much impressed by her beauty and therefore proposes her but she rejects his offer because she knows that he cannot offer her true love and happiness. Thus Abhijit- Aasha Rani affair is also futile because like Akshay, Abhijit is a married person. As a typical modern liberated woman she tells him that he better find love in his wife:

You are not making love to me!
You are screwing my image- my screen image. Get out of here Abhijit. Go back to your wife and make a man of yourself! It is all over between us. I never want to see you again! .... ‘Go home, Abhijit. I have my own life to lead ....’ (SN 167-168)

Then, Aasha Rani’s lesbian experience with a journalist friend, Linda is not just a form of deviant behaviour but it is something more because sex with woman implies independence from man. In this respect Linda advises Aasha Rani:

I am a survivor, yaar, .... In this badmash city and this badmash business, you have to be one. You are a real bachchi – a mama’s girl. You should be on your own. Live life for yourself, Be like me – free! (SN 131)

In lesbian relationship there is mutuality as Simone de Beauvoir (1966: 155) observes:

Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to recreate the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat, in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality.

Aasha Rani feels pleasant and happy in the arms of Linda. In fact, lesbianism poses a great threat to heterosexuality which is revealed in
the words of Linda, who says to Aasha Rani, “let me do to you what
no man could have done …. Stay with me, you will forget men, you
will forget everything you have known before. – This is love,
understand? This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our
bodies” (SN 136-137). After the act, Aasha Rani also frankly admits
the superiority of lesbian pleasure to heterosexual : “Yes, she thought,
this is what it should be, tender, beautiful and erotic. In a way it
could never be with a man” (SN 137). Therefore, according to Hite
(1987 : 409), “a woman prefers lesbian relationship because it is
much easier to give emotionally to a woman, to surrender ego, …..”
Here surrendering of ego is important. Its implication is that it is
easier to surrender before one’s own sex than to the counterpart who
always rules, exploits and dominates the female. Lesbian relationship
promotes complete freedom from the male which is again an
important principle of Women’s Liberation Movement.

In Starry Nights, Shobha De also reinforces her plea for
liberation through the example of Sudha, Aasha Rani’s sister. After
Aasha Rani’s departure to New Zealand and her marriage to a
foreigner, her mother feels hatred for her. As deprived of money she
thinks to use her younger daughter as a source of income. Consequently, with the help of Kishenbhai Sudha Rani is tempted,
flattered and pushed into the film industry. Her tremendous success
in the world of cinema transforms her completely. She stops supporting her mother and also hates her sister Aasha Rani. Her remark in her interview to the journalist Linda shows how jealous she is of Aasha Rani – “Bechari akka, I can understand how she must be feeling. Now I am the star and she is nobody. Poor thing …” (266).

Sudha lives with Amar, a hero without marriage in a grand bungalow at Vile Parle. Here cohabitation, and not marriage seems to be the watchword for her. Besides, she is more strategic and calculating than Aasha Rani. The following words of her mother to Aasha Rani clearly reveal that Sudha is a woman of inordinate ambition who aspires to be a star bigger than Aasha Rani:

Look at your sister – she is hard-hearted and vicious. She has turned on her own amma, not realizing that whatever I did, I did for her. She wanted to be a big star. She wanted to beat you. That was her ambition from the very beginning. That is what she told me when she came to Bombay. “Amma, make me a top heroine. I want to be bigger than akka. I want to be the best. I want people to forget her. I am better than her – I can prove it.”

(SN 261)

Like Aasha Rani, she is a modern, bold and capable enough to survive in the declining moral values of life. The novelist describes aptly how Sudha is liberated and proud of her achievement:
‘I am where I am because I deserve to be here’; ‘Rivals? What rivals. My only competition is me’; ‘Heroes need me more than I need them’; ‘Strip? What for? The whole country goes crazy when I show just my ankle’; ‘Marriage? I don’t need it. The poor man would die of an inferiority complex’; ‘Politics and me don’t go together’. You see my one point programme ends with me.’ (SN 286-287)

Further, when Sudha Rani is on top of her film career, she borrows money heavily from the underworld Don, with a promise to offer him a great share of the profits, to launch a film with Amar. Unfortunately the film overshots the original budget four times over. So again she borrows some more cash after mortgaging everything she owned. Finally the film is released five months behind schedule. But it turned out to be a big hit. Out of greed for money she neglects to keep her promise. Though she is advised by her mother, Amar and Kishenbhai, she refuses to surrender. She emphatically says:

It is all my money. The film is mine, the idea is mine, the story is mine. I have acted in it, the credit goes to me, why should I part with more? I took the risk. I gambled. Now I will decide what to do with the money I have earned.” (SN 382)
This incident indicates the fact that she is independent in every way. Aasha Rani comes back to India from New Zealand and meets her sister Sudha who after an acid attack on her by her enemies, is struggling for life. Sudha is full of repentance. She relates her present suffering to the sin committed by her. It is during Aasha’s absence Sudha has bagged some big roles and tried to defame her sister. But Aasha Rani consoles her telling her to stay together, reopen their father’s studio and work together. Her confidence about their success is clearly reflected in her talk to Sudha, “The two of us together will reopen Appa’s studio – our studio. We will make films, good films, and we will survive. Not just survive, but prosper, … We are going to succeed and never look back” (SN 398-399). Thus the experiences of Aasha, Sudha Rani and the others clearly show that it is due to male hegemony their attempts to achieve liberation have been self-destructive. In spite of this, the novel ends on an optimistic note. It symbolizes a new beginning once again. Aasha Rani’s sufferings due to her exploitation by men and her desertion by her husband Jay, do not suppress her desire and prevent her from living a life of her own. In spite of a number of horrible experiences of sexual exploitation and humiliations she is not discouraged and disheartened. She rises like a Phoenix to be an emancipated woman again.

Finally, Aasha Rani overcomes all the cruel realities of life and joins her family at Madras. Now she has her own identity, a new
existence. She feels the sense of belonging and has an opportunity to do something creative in her life. Instead of escaping from the responsibilities of life or breaking down due to the problems, she struggles, survives and achieves success. Now it is Sasha, Aasha Rani’s daughter, who has to continue the show, the struggle and survival of a woman against the male-dominated society. Aasha Rani thinks rightly:

Together they would conquer the world. Together, her little daughter and she would carve themselves a niche. With no one telling them how to live life. No heart breaks, no disappointments, no compromises… Sasha would live life on her own terms. And she would bring her up as amma never had. Sasha had the makings of a star. An unforgettable star. The Golden Girl of the silver screen! Oh yes, Sasha would be tomorrow’s Lover Girl!

\[(SN\ 400-401)\]

Thus, she dreams to make her daughter the golden girl of the screen and decides to play herself the role of a dutiful mother. Aasha Rani, the liberated new woman, becomes sane and wise through her own poignant personal experiences in the cosmopolitan glamorous world.

Today women play the role of teachers, business executives, doctors and public servants. Consequently, they enjoy individuality
of their own and public respectability. But the percentage of such women is very meagre. Hence, women’s struggle for emancipation is not yet over. It is continued by a few educated women in order to communicate to the world their own bitter experiences of life as well as their ideas regarding the need for women’s emancipation. Shobha De is one of the writers with a feminist leanings. Her fiction is an attempt to create a space for feminine reality. She makes no pretensions about her obsession with what is called a ‘taboo subject’ in her works. She (The Hindu, Feb. 2, 1997) confesses:

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

Her novels are characterized by her sense of empathy for the women who, having come out of the bounds of domesticity and marriage, assert their identity. It is this social concern which is the main base of Shobha De’s novel *Sisters*. It is the story of two upper-class young business women namely Mikki and Alisha. The novel throws significant light on the dark realities of the business world. Shobha
De dives deep into the hearts of the liberated upper class women in the contemporary society and depicts the real characters as they are and not as they ought to be.

In the Indian tradition marriage is the turning point and the beginning of a new way of life. It is glorified as a holy union of man and woman. It is a ritual that involves the sanctity of Agni or holy fire, the ‘Sapathapadi’, the mantras like ‘Dharmocha’, ‘Kaamecha’ and fidelity till death. However, in Shobha De’s novels all these ideas regarding marriage are shattered by her modern liberated women. As the women do not find happiness in marriage, they go out in search of more fulfilling experiences without any hesitation. De depicts the breaking up of the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In this context Shobha De’s confident, attractive and assertive women redefine the concept of marriage. Accordingly, man and woman do not become one in marriage, instead they merely become partners in conjugal bliss. With marriage the other important issue that De’s novels deal with is sex. Sex to her women is no longer a dreaded and despised thing. Her women enjoy a great deal of sexual freedom. Even marriage cannot prevent them from enjoying sexual freedom. The moment their marriages fail, they establish extra-marital relationships.
Sisters shows how the major characters, Mikki and Alisha pass through the unpleasant experiences of life and how they eventually realize their freedom – a freedom to live a life of their own choice. After the death of the parents both Mikki and Alisha struggle hard to retain the position which their father had left for them. Mikki is neither shocked nor upset by the tragic death of her parents. This is clearly revealed when she orders Gangubai: “Go and get me a coffee” (3). She is a stranger even to the funeral ritual and the crowd. The novelist describes her loneliness in these words, “Her parents were dead. There was nobody she cared for. And nobody who cared for her” (9). In the beginning of the novel itself one understands that she is compelled by the untimely death of her parents to leave America for Mumbai and shoulder the responsibility of her father’s business. Though she is too young, she is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt. Being an educated, liberated young woman without any legitimate guardian to look after her, she attends many parties and comes in contact with many young men such as Navin, Shanay and Binny Malhotra who are interested in her only for sexual pleasures. First she deals with Navin and then turns to Binny Malhotra and finally marries him. This indicates that the concept of morality arising out of love for one and the same person is outdated. The women enjoy life through the act of love before and after
marriage and even outside marriage. This reveals that the concept of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a tremendous change. Mikki suffers throughout her marital life and it is through her suffering that she realizes the art of living. As a modern young woman she is bold enough to express her disagreement with her husband’s concept of marriage in the following words:

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 would be doing things together. Enjoying life. Nowadays I get to see you only at parties. Isn’t that funny? (Sisters 115)

Moreover, in the professional life too there is struggle on the part of Mikki which results from her desire for freedom. She is financially independent but she thinks that the materialistic pleasures are nothing without the freedom of self. As a result, she fights for the freedom of self. It is during her struggle one day suddenly and unexpectedly she receives a strong blow as Binny goes in for divorce and turns her out of his home. Mikki realizes Binny Malhotra’s hypocrisy. This results into her determination for retaining her dignity and ownership of industries. It is at this stage that Binny with his illegitimate family meets his death. However, Mikki’s experience with Binny gives her an insight into her ‘being’ as a woman and an individual. Binny’s
death changes the course of her life completely. It transforms her into a mature woman. Her encounters with different men help her to develop into an independent woman who at the cost of her individuality finally saves the Hiralal Industries.

Shobha De’s unmarried women also strive for sexual liberty. Though, Alisha hates and seems to be jealous of Mikki, she stands for desire of liberation for women in sexual matters. She ignores the social norms and moral codes and freely enjoys sex with different men. First she goes to Navin for sexual fulfillment and after several sexual encounters with him turns to Dr. Kurien. In one of the sensational scenes while enjoying sex with Alisha, Dr. Kurien says, “All you rich women are the same – you want more all the time. Nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all….it is free” (186). This frank and candid outlook to sex continues till the end of the novel. Alisha is determined to smash the traditional image of woman. She indulges in free sex using men as playthings. She wants Dr. Kurien to leave his wife and children and marry her. But being a Catholic, he rejects her will and remains faithful to his wife. While expressing his disapproval he tells Alisha, “for women like you – men are playthings. 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). Thus Alisha, a lovable young woman leads a
flirtatious life. Though it seems a breach of moral code, it is a pointer to the arrival of a new value system and a mode of self-assertion. Here Alisha appears as an emerging New Woman. Her relationship with Dr. Kurien is purely physical and for temporary sexual pleasure devoid of any emotional fervour. In her attitude and behaviour, she is similar to her sister Mikki. Thus De’s women break all sorts of taboos and feel liberated. Sex for them is a strong reality and it is their biological need. They do not remain passive. Instead they actively participate in it and talk about it openheartedly. It is in this respect that they differ considerably from the traditional Indian women for whom sex is shameful. Here Shobha De seems to show the arrival of ‘new women’ who rebel against the existing subordination and passivity of woman and “project their own passions onto others as a female power-play in order to deconstruct the male ego” (Swain, 1999 : 135).

Next, Taarini, a middle-class working woman asserts her love for Shashi, despite her husband and children. Her following 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 am involved with is not rich or powerful like your husband or like any of the other men you know. He is a humble
trade unionist. He works in my office and I admire his
guts. Of course, he is married. But so what? He is
honest, principled, committed to his cause. (Sisters 145)

Taarini is a ‘new woman’ for she justifies “other relationships” and
asserts the right of a woman to have her own identity and
individuality. In this connection, her statement is worth quoting: “it
is not only glamorous, beautiful women who have affairs. Even an
ordinary woman like me sometimes finds someone who loves her,
cares for her, wants to spend his life with her” (146). The woman like
Taarini establishes a successful and happy relationship with young
men who allow her to “experience what love is. What sex is … with
the right person” (146).

The end of the Sisters is happy as there is reconciliation
between two sisters. Finally it is Mikki who wins over her step sister
Alisha by her sincere love. Blood relationship ultimately triumphs
over hatred. Though Mikki is affected by T. B. and Alisha is addicted
to drugs, there is reconciliation between them because both the sisters
realize the need to live together. Mikki inherits Binny Malhotra’s
wealth after his death and thus the sisters look forward to a better
tomorrow. They both decide to depart to London. Their departure to
London is, therefore, a kind of salvation from the evils of corrupt
business world. It is for a complete cure, change and acceptance of
life. In the lounge they find two smart young Indians going to
London by the same flight and are attracted towards them. While
picking champagne glasses Alisha says, “I had marriage in mind”, to
which Mikki replies “So did I”. Alisha chooses one of the two
Indians going to London with them. Mikki smiles and looks out
through the window at the twilight sky outside. “She spotted the lone
evening star. Mikki quickly made a wish. A wish she knew was
go ing to come true, finally” (222). Now the sisters are completely
free and self-reliant, enjoying free existence. Finally both the
liberated sisters, Mikki and Alisha accept marriage as reality.

Shobha De’s Strange Obsession is the unique creation as it
depicts the lesbian relationship between two women. The idea of
woman as a free and independent existent is repeatedly emphasized.
The story of the novel moves around the life and lesbian relationship
of two young women namely Amrita Aggarwal and Meenakshi
Iyengar. The protest against male hegemony takes another form in
sexual matters in this novel. In an effort to free themselves
completely from dependence on men, women like Meenakshi Iyengar
indulge in lesbianism. They seem to propagate lesbianism as an
alternative to sexuality. Meenakshi called ‘Minx’ Iyengar not only
forces Amrita to have lesbian ties with her but also firmly believes in
it to be something natural. In this respect she argues with Karan, the
photographer: “And what is abnormal about mine? Just because I am a woman does it mean my love is inferior to yours? Or to any man’s?” (163). During Amrita’s stay in Mumbai for modeling assignments Minx enjoys sex experience with her for several times. Even when Amrita goes to Delhi to see her parents Minx follows and constantly haunts her and in the very house of Amrita seduces her. Since her parents have no control over her, she is free like a bird to do anything that she liked. As a result, she very boldly indulges in the lesbian relationship with Amrita. She is daughter of an Inspector General of Police to whom money is no object, obsession is everything. She drives around in a black Gypsy and knows every dada and cop in town. She can scare the wits out of everyone in the modelling world of Mumbai. With a snap of her fingers she has the superstud beaten up by the cops and she personally disfigures a model who is a threat to Amrita’s career. She can also materialize and dematerialise in five-star hotels and can even get a seat on Indian Airlines at a moment’s notice. In other words, Minx is so powerful and liberated woman that Amrita, though a supermodel, becomes a mere tool in her hands. Thus through the portrayal of Minx novelist deconstructs the traditional concepts of love and sex.

Shobha De, however, depicts Amrita to be self-reliant because she wants to deconstruct all the established order of the first sex of
the society. Amrita wishes to achieve the fame of the first sex. She shows all the capabilities of the achievement. Even her brother Ashish admires her ability when he says, “Amrita is capable of looking after herself. We all know that. When she decided to go to Bombay, nobody tried to stop her because we had full faith in her” (101). Again Amrita’s desire to be self-reliant is clearly reflected in her way she is drawn to Rover (Ranjit Grover) without her own knowledge:

Amrita gazed at him, noticing everything about him and feeling powerless. Of course he was maddeningly handsome – the most attractive man she had ever seen. But she was beginning to realize that it was something more than his looks that had made her abandon her innate caution and good sense when they were together. It was his utter lack of interest in anybody other than himself that she found disturbing and fascinating at the same time. (SO 36)

Amrita falls under Rover’s spell and consequently starts a physical relationship with him with a forced kiss by him. Despite the fact that the people warn her about Rover, she cannot resist him. It is due to her strong sexual urge for Rover that she forgets the consequences of the relationship and frankly mates with him. It is quite clear that knowing Rover’s nature, there is no hope for Amrita to have a
permanent relationship with him based on mutual trust and love. Even then she neglects the established social conventions in order to bed with her lover who she is told ‘treats his women like dirt” (38). She is already warned that “he will use you and discard you” (38). Yet, she enjoys sex with him without any promise for stability in their relationship. This clearly shows the self-willed and liberal girl in Amrita.

After Rover, now it is the turn of Partha to play the role of her lover. In fact, it is the modern woman’s attitude towards her right which makes her love anyone and everyone she wants to love. As a result, she does not hesitate to kiss Partha before she parts from him: “Amrita leaned over and kissed him warmly. Don’t hold it against me. I have a crush on you and I am enjoying it. I am hoping you will have one on me too. See you soon” (115). It may be argued that women have an identity of their own and it is well within their power to act as they like. Amrita is a ‘new woman’ who refuses just to be a toy in the hands of tradition where man has total control. Perhaps she also would like to break the myth that a woman should maintain her virginity and indirectly be the ‘slave’ of man who would marry her. She is one among the large number of women who come out of the margins to occupy the centre. She never wants to be a victim or commodity to be sold or bought. She does not want to be “an evil
counterfeit”, “a cursed pestilence”, “a weak vessal” or an “incidental being”. Naturally she is able to make “new adjustments” as and when she is required to do so. The character of Amrita is certainly to be looked at against the background of the ground reality that we have:

Since women have been defined as the nurturers of the young and bearers of the cultural values of love and co-operation and yet, in the real world they have been generally excluded from the sources of power, they are in an ideal position to create an alternative social vision.

(Gupta, 1992 : 27)

Finally, it is Mr. Iyengar, Minx’s father who assures Amrita that she would be free from all kinds of torments in future because all the photographs, films, recording and the other things damaging her image are already destroyed. Amrita has then a sigh of relief. Now she feels safe and protected. In the Epilogue we are told about the death of Minx, as the news item appeared in the newspaper. Amrita reads and rereads it and feels that she is free. At last Minx dies and Amrita feels liberated. Thus Amrita is one of the magnificent creations of Shobha De who is destined to overcome oppression from a person of her own sex. Though the focal point in this novel is the lesbian relationship between Minx and Amrita, the novelist never forgets for a moment the tainted image of a modern liberated woman.
In *Sultry Days*, Shobha De’s skill in depicting the female characters is simply remarkable. Besides this, what is interesting to note is her treatment of the position of women and their attitude to marriage. There is, for instance, Karen Roy’s wife who resembles “an overbearing, imperious bitch” (114). Nobody dares to call her by her first name. She is addressed to as Mrs. D’Lima though her husband is known by his first name. Both lead separate lives. She takes pride in being a woman of “exotic good looks that couldn’t be traced to any ethnic group” (115). She would explain, “I am one – eighth Turkish – my great – grandmother was a naughty girl – one fourth Khasi, one-sixth Goan and one-third Himachali ….” (115).

Next, there is Karen Roy’s beloved, Maitreyee who represents ‘the ‘available Bombay woman’ – brazen, bold, brassy. She has hair streaked with gold and purple, and wears a swirling ghagra with a backless choli” (116-117). She is known for her ‘enormous vitality’ and would frankly ask “Is there some special virtue in consistency?”(118). Lotika is another free woman who believes that she was an apsara in her earlier life and has disturbed a rishi’s meditation by her ravishing beauty. The narrator tells that she “was a sought-after woman on the social circuit” whose the biggest asset “was her single status and it was her colourful past that sent out signals” (349). She is an attractive woman who recently told to an
interviewer of a woman’s monthly magazine that she was the victim of child abuse at eight, was raped by the cousin at the age of fourteen, was married off at the age of nineteen and was divorced at twenty-four. Her attitude to all these experiences reflects in her brief, but meaningful, comment: “Chalta hai” (349). Aarti, an account executive is next emancipated woman in the novel. She wears “cut-away sleeved choli blouses without shaving her armpits” and smokes Charms cigarettes holding them ‘awkwardly between her fingers and blowing smoke out of her nostrils” (125). She keeps raising her arms constantly, which to Deb means “it is the animal in her”. She would giggle and giggle “jangling the two hundred silver bangles ….. On both arms from wrist to elbow” (127). Vimala, a widow from Madhya Pradesh, refers to herself as a ‘bachelor girl’. Further through the portrayal of Manju and her attitude towards her husband Vikki, Shobha De presents the image of a completely liberated and emancipated woman. She is such a dominating and overbearing woman that her husband Vikki appears as a mere doll. About her husband she remarks surcastically:

Looks after the kids. Takes leave when I travel to stay home. Vikki even cooks us all a great meal when the servant doesn’t show up. …. I hate entering the kitchen. I can’t make a cup of tea … forget that, I don’t even
know how to light the bloody gas. … She cared for just two things in the world – her job and her bank account. … I refuse to spend on ghar-ka-kharcha. That is my Vikki’s responsibility. What is the point of having a husband if he can’t pay all the bills. … for the kids Vikki does everything – bath – shath, breakfast, potty, dropping, fetching. He is the one who goes for Open Day, Sports, drama, all that nonsense. Where do I have the time? The kids are fast asleep when I get home. And I wake up after they have left for school.

(\textit{SD} 192-193)

Thus the novelist presents a group of modern women such as D’Lima, Lotika, Vimala, Aarti, Maitreyee and Manju who are liberated and emancipated new women to highlight the changed perspectives of women in recent times.

Moreover, the other female characters in the novel too, break the established patriarchal norms through their deviant behaviour. Their action and assertions reveal that they are highly independent young modern women. Chandni is one of them who, dressed in a wildly colourful \textit{ghagra} and tunic, looks “like a horny \textit{banjaran} or a sexy sweeperess” (255). Shona, the model from London, knows how to ‘look different – from Cleopatra to Sridevi’. She wears a ‘skilfully cut wig’ to hide her ‘major beauty flaw’ that is her forehead is ‘as large as a \textit{papad}’ (173). Next, there is the most sought-after playback
singer, Tanya the Temptress, has ‘bedroom eyes’ which look ‘like luminous dishes the size of a full moon’ (222). Feroze is another woman who is independent in many ways. She is enterprising, manipulative and full of charm. She lives on a diet of film magazines. She wants to be the first woman Parsee director of Hindi films. She has ‘lived, breathed and dreamed movies” (243). In reality, however, she is a weird lesbian and a sex-maniac. She follows the actress Kiki “like a puppy. Sending her flowers and poems. Fetching her food. Carrying her clothes. Generally behaving like a love-lorn maiden” (248). Kiki is like a dynamite on the set. The male protagonist of the novel, Deb is particularly struck by ‘something primal’ and a ‘basic attraction’ in her : ‘That female is like bijli” he says (246). Zainab is Kiki’s chief rival. She takes pride in being “the film industry’s first unwed mother,” the father of the child being “a mysterious stranger – a foreigner not connected with showbiz at all” (249). All these women depicted by the novelist have totally disregard for the basic spiritual and moral concerns of the womanhood. They represent an entirely different value system. None of these women can be called normal human beings. They are all ultra-modern who long for freedom and liberation in all walks of life. This is again clearly reflected in the words of Mrs. Mehta when she talks to Mrs. Verma : “We are not only housekeepers, after all. If
there is no servant, then forget work, yaar. You can order food from the club- nobody will notice” (39).

Shobha De’s women are more domineering and bold in comparison to their male counterparts. They are not submissive. They do not feel guilty about their affairs and attitudes. For example, in *Sultry Days*, the female character Sujata, who has stopped playing the roles of wife and mother long ago, feels that her duties are over as her children are self-dependent. Her justification for liberation is as following:

My duties are over. They are on their own … I have played the roles I was expected to at the appropriate time. Now … I am on my own. And they are on their own. This is my life. I want to live it my way…. Yes…. They accept. Why shouldn’t they? I have been a good wife and mother. I am still here, living in the same house. They are grateful. I could easily have left and gone away. So many men have longed to make me theirs. I receive marriage proposals all the time … even now. *(SD 51)*

Sujata who has fulfilled her duties of mother and wife is very similar to Chandani, Shona, Tanya, Feroze etc. It is in this way that the attractive and confident socialite women in the novels of Shobha De define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death is replaced
by sexual freedom. Marriage to such women is not more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners. This change in their attitude towards marriage represents, according to Shobha De (1994 : 112), “a big step forward” towards freedom of women. She advocates:

The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a life long meal-ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go.

The ‘new’ Indian women who have attained economic independence and stability are quite different from the others. They are economically independent and as a matter of fact, their attitude is characterized by a rare seriousness in the novel:

They carried the awesome weight of an MBA degree … on their padded shoulders. These were no-nonsense, women who had ‘take me seriously’ written all over
them. They even wore business suits to work and carried burgundy – coloured briefcases …. They took their jobs with an earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity. Even the married ones insisted on being addressed as ‘Ms’ or stuck to their maiden names…. Workholism for women had become very fashionable. 

(SD 194-195)

In this regard, the words of the veteran actor Mohan Agashe at the launching of De’s very recent book Superstar India (2008) ring true. In an interview with Shobha De (The Times of India, 6 June, 2008, P. 22) he says, ‘Women are an essential part of society. In India, the day the woman walked out of home to earn her living, the dynamics of society changed and this potent change fascinates me.” Shobha De, however, while supporting economic independence, would not approve of a mania for money. This is evident in her making of Aasha Rani of Starry Nights to shout at her overpowering mother who pushes her into the world of pornographic films. Aasha Rani criticizes her mother who thinks only of money and looks at her daughter merely as a money making machine. Aasha Rani has so far done a lot, worked hard for everybody – sister Sudha, mother and the others. Now she wants to live for herself and enjoy her life. So, she refuses to be just a toy in the hands of her mother. Money is
important, the novelist seems to suggest, but living one’s own life is even more important.

Shobha De has raised sexuality both as a weapon and a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of women are sex-centered in the male-dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains of husband and society. They are rebellious and ‘new women’ and a ‘liberated human beings’. It is a fact that due to growing sexual encounters, promiscuous life and economic independence, the women are leading towards divorce, ego-crisis and restlessness. In the novel Pramila, a woman from Nagpur, falls into this category. Married to a mechanical engineer she is a non-conformist. She has everything that a traditional woman can ask for – “a husband with a ‘solid’ job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own and all the time in the world to pursue her interests” (262). Yet she feels bored, suffocated and frustrated in this kind of environment, because she suffers from ‘a big-city hang-up’. She has a talent which 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 right place for her and her talents. One day, suddenly and unexpectedly without informing anyone she goes to Mumbai to become a ‘woman of substance’. There in Mumbai her poems are
translated into English and she moves from success to success. For this, Pramila separates from her husband and takes her two daughters with her. Boredom and frustration with her surrounding, disappearing from Nagpur and appearing on the Mumbai scene, taking up English writing and discarding Marathi and divorcing her husband are stages of her life. In fact, the women like Pramila, driven by a deep-rooted desire for personal fulfillment, are indifferent to their duties towards family, children and society. They tend to be individualists. This type of selfish individualism is an important feature of the women’s struggle in contemporary times. Instead of trying to organize and find certain forms of common interest, these women indulge in selfish pursuits and self-seeking forms of behaviour. The clash between two generations – Mrs. Verma the traditional mother and Nisha the new emancipated daughter is presented starkly in this masterpiece.

Shobha De in Second Thoughts uses the city Mumbai as a metaphor for freedom. In the beginning of the novel, it is used as a rationale for the protagonist Maya’s decision to accept the role of a housewife in an arranged marriage. Maya claims that it is her desire to escape from conservative Kolkatta to the exciting world of Mumbai. However, both the city and her marriage shatter her expectations. Maya’s desire to lead a free life in the licentious set up of Mumbai is frustrated as she fails to understand her husband’s
outlook. So her hopes to be away from her parents’ control are all crushed down. She is denied access to the cosmopolitan freedom she associates with Mumbai. Maya begins to discover that her own position as a wife to a man who is a western-educated bank official, is undermined by his traditional attitude to women. Naturally, she is caught in a dilemma between her husband’s conservatism and her desire for liberation.

Since her marriage to Ranjan, the entry of Nikhil Verma into her life only brings a new meaning of existence for her. She wants to be free from the present suffocating life and enjoy the glittering and glamorous life of Mumbai. While in the company of Nikhil there is no limit to her joy and happiness which is expressed by her in these words: “I wanted my insides to perform a wild dance while a mangy camel sauntered down the beach carrying me atop” (74). It is obvious that with a little encouragement from Nikhil, she is prepared to say goodbye to her “uninspiring life without the slightest regret” (171). Now she comes face to face with the Mumbai she has anticipated. Once when her husband Ranjan is away on a business trip, Maya feels free like a bird in the company of Nikhil. But this joy of Maya does not last long. Soon Nikhil’s engagement to a Delhi based girl is announced and therefore, Maya is again disillusioned. She is disturbed as she realizes that life of a traditional housewife is destined
to her. Thus like her other novels, here too, Shobha De examines the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. According to Shanta Krishnaswamy (1984: vi):

Her women characters try to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this trapeze act, they are further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them, when they face loneliness and lack of communication and community and are finally brought to mental crises when masculine and institutional pressures are added to exacerbate them further.

Shobha De successfully depicts the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women in dealing with the situations emerging from a clash between conservatism and liberalism. She also highlights in the present novel certain issues such as the non-acceptance of the liberated woman by the Indian society, women’s freedom in the contemporary India and an individual dilemma. The novel depicts struggles to maintain an equilibrium between tradition and modernity. It is shown through the behaviour of Maya, the representative of contemporary women.

The world of Shobha De’s novel *Snapshots* is entirely dominated by women. It is a world full of adventures of powerful,
unrestrained free new women. The writer, while exploring the experiences of six women – Swati, Aparna, Reema, Noor, Surekha and Rashmi, presents a very candid picture of the metropolitan lifestyle through a transformed version of the traditional values. She has portrayed all the female characters as more powerful than their counterparts. Consequently, women occupy the centre whereas men stand on the periphery. The women throw the norms of society to the wind and freely indulge in love-play with men because they believe only in an enjoyment of life. Therefore, the word ‘morality’ does not exist for them. They are empowered by their sexuality. The men fail to control them either with their power or ideological percepts.

Shobha De believes in power and women power as a trend-setter of society. Money to the novelist is the great leveller. In the novel, for example, she changes the equation of power game and presents women as either controlling power or are in a position to ignore the norms prescribed by the male authority. Her women realize that financial independence is the basic requirement for their empowerment. Therefore, the majority of the women that dominate the fictional world of Shobha De are career-oriented personalities, as a result, they enjoy complete financial freedom. Grabbing of power through ethical and non-ethical means now no longer remains the right of man. Power is not the personal property of patriarchy. The
six women presented in the novel disregard male power totally by rejecting the traditional norms of female behaviour prescribed by patriarchy. The women either earn individually or very cleverly control the economic conditions of their husbands which, in fact, help them to live their lives as they want. Being physically and intellectually strong enough, they hold the reins of power firmly in their own hands. The basic issues and values of life have been totally transformed by the women.

The novelist delves deep into the hearts of the liberated upper-class women in the contemporary society and depicts them as they are and not as what they should have been. For instance, Surekha, a middle-class housewife, shows too much concern for her mother-in-law but the truth hidden behind this praiseworthy act is her homosexual interest in her friend Dolly. On one hand she manages to keep her husband happy and on the other ensures a space of her own. Aparna in *Snapshots* is “a corporate woman, an Indian corporate woman. A business woman” (180). She is a divorcée but undeterred reaches to the top of the corporate ladder. There is nothing that can undermine her confidence. In the social as well as professional life her behaviour is totally anti-patriarchal. She rejects marriage, though in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “it is a destiny traditionally offered by society to woman.” Aparna’s role, like the other women in
the novel, is the role of an emancipated woman. Similarly, Rashmi is also liberated woman in the novel. Men, she feels, are “Intrinsically, instinctively, intuitively dishonest” (49). So she asks ‘was being manless such a shame?’ (50) Men may come and men may go, “float in and out of her life like wispy cotton balls on a summer day”, (50) but she can go on forever with her independence and her own way of life.

At the close of the twentieth century there is considerable change in the attitude of women to love and sex. The kind of change that marks the modern women’s attitude towards sex is clearly reflected in the words of outspoken Swati when she talks to her school friends: “The difference between the two of us (Swati and Balbir) and all of you is that we rejoice in our sexuality. We don’t suppress it. We don’t dismiss it. We don’t find it dirty. Sex doesn’t threaten us …” (165). This psychology definitely reduces man’s power over women. The upper-class women do not feel shy. They speak about both love and sex frankly and even in public. For example, the six women in the novel freely indulge in talking about their past as well as present love-affairs, pre and post-marital relationships with men of their choice. These women feel free to discuss their affairs with men, knowing well that at times some of them are being enjoyed by the same man. This is because they are
liberated and belong to a particular class of Indian society. They establish new relationships without breaking the family. In this context, Reema’s advice to married women “Say no to divorce. Never break up the home. Have your fun quietly somewhere. But don’t leave the family. That is the sensible way of handling the situation” (214) – seems to be representative of the neo-rich class. Reema enjoys illicit relationship with her own brother-in-law and uses her husband just for her material comfort. Even then she does not suffer from guilty feelings. The patriarchal enclosure of marriage fails to trap her. Though married, she lives like completely free and emancipated woman.

Thus, the modern, urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women of Shobha De transform themselves from “commodities” to “identities”. Marriage can no longer hold them down.

Finally, in the use of language also Shobha De breaks new grounds. She has presented her views in a naked language in order to present the so-called sophisticated people in Mumbai. What is observed in Mumbai can be seen in each cosmopolitan city of India. She has used the Hindi words without translating them into English like ‘Arrey Baba’, ‘Kya cheez hai’, ‘Arrey Bhagwan’, ‘Chalta hai’,

‘Jao aish karō’, ‘Chalu and capitalist kutta’ etc. to add another dimension to English language. Shobha De breaks the shackles of linguistic discipline boldly by employing what would normally be considered highly objectionable language, thereby liberating the language from the male hegemony, for example, she uses words like ‘fuck you’, ‘chickening out’, ‘Holy shit’, ‘hijra or chhakkaa’ etc. In other words, her women use forbidden words and seems to have gained the right to use the male sexual vocabulary.
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