Chapter 5

CULTURE Vs ASPIRATION
Culture of any country is presented through art, literature, costumes, customs and traditions of a community that moulds the pattern of human activity. The natural environment of any region greatly affects the lifestyle of the people and helps in shaping its culture. The diversity in the cultures around the world is also a result of the mindsets of people inhabiting different regions of the world. Culture is composed of everything symbolic that we learn. It includes all our actions and beliefs that are transmitted from one generation to the other and become meaningful when followed as a value system. Our values include whatever we think of as good versus bad, right versus wrong or beautiful versus ugly. Therefore these set of values which we call culture differ from community to community or society to society.

Culture is the sum total of thoughts (the way in which people perceive, interpret and understand the world around them) and spirituality (the value system transmitted through generations for the inner well-being of human beings), expressed through language and actions. Moreover, Culture guides social activity which contains the shared pursuits within a cultural community demonstrated in a variety of festivities and life-celebrating events. It develops through interaction which includes social aspects of human contact, including the give-and-take of socialization, negotiation, protocol and conventions. Thus,
"culture is the quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits etc." ¹

The word 'culture' nowadays is used in so many peripheral contexts that its original meaning has been submerged. Nowadays the word 'culture' has been added with different other words, changing its meaning like "popular culture" means the collective human intellectual achievements. 'Consumerist culture' determines the status of a person with respect of his educational success and/or financial strength. To be an integral part of this culture, one has to have a higher spending power to yield a greater availability of materialistic pleasures and facilities. 'Emerging Culture' reflects the attitudes and behavioural characteristics of a particular social group. An emerging drug and pub culture among the youngsters and the kitty party culture among women of today are the examples. A modern definition of culture is given by anthropologist William. A: Haviland in Cultural Anthropology as-

"Culture is a set of rules or standard that when acted upon by the members of a society, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable." ²

In other words culture does not refer to the behaviour that is observed but to values and beliefs which generate behaviour.

In more modern context culture is a system of the patterns and modes of expectations, expressions, values, institutionalization and
enjoyment habits of people in general. It is a kind of refinement which is born of education and enlightenment. It is not an outcome of individual attempts rather people, families, societies and civilizations as a whole develop and change it with the flow of time. Thus, Culture is not built or changed in one era. It is nurtured in the infinitive lap of time, age after age. Social traditions, arts, festivals, retreats, the way of life and the values of community are shaped on the foundation of its culture. Any disruption in the flow of cultural values alters the structure of a society or civilization.

Different-races, societies and nations have their own specific culture because of the variations in the historical circumstances, philosophies and modes of life, specialties of personal and social life, geographical conditions, the extent of the development of science and other fields of knowledge etc. The cultural diversity is natural. Still each culture has certain fundamental elements that are universal because of which it maintains its identity. The more these timeless, superlative values are present in the core of a culture, the greater would be its expansion and effects. Culture emanating from selfish motives, fanatic aspirations or narrow ideologies cannot stand the test of time. They inflate or burst like bubbles in due course.

The Cultural values of a community give it an identity of its own. A community gains a character and a personality of its own because of the culture of its people. Culture is shared by the members of a community. It is learned and passed from the older generations to
the newer ones. For an effective transfer of culture from one generation to other, it has to be translated into symbols. Language, art and religion serve as the symbolic means of transfer of cultural values between generations. But it must be noted that some ancient convictions, rigid principles, traditions or customs alone couldn't be regarded as culture.

"Culture in its most natural form is like an ever flowing current of a river that overcomes or embraces every obstacle and adjusts its direction accordingly without stopping its flow" ³

So in spite of rigidity and false convictions it must be open and adaptive to the progressive trends as per the needs of the time. To pass on a rich culture to future generations, it is essential to retain what is good and beneficial and adapt new things from other cultures for the betterment of the society.

As far as women’s position is concerned, India has a rich culture where women share equal status as men. We get description of 'ARDHANAREESHWAR' in Hindu Mythology in which God is regarded half man and half woman. Women have got equal importance in all the walks of life. One could find an idealized image of woman in ancient literature-

"Yatra naryastu pujyante, ramante tatra devah" ⁴

(Where women are honoured, the Gods are pleased and when they are not honoured, all work become fruitless).
But with the passage of time this idealized image witnessed a great change. During medieval period in India, due to foreign invasions and by the admixture of different cultures, the women came at the secondary position as compared to men. At this time, the position of woman in the Indian society was fed on well-known injunctions of the Manusmriti-

Pita rakshanti Kaumarye, bharta, rakshati youvane

Rakshanti Sthvire putrah, no stri svatantrayam arhati

(The father protects her during her adolescence and the husband in her youth and when she becomes old she is protected by her sons. Thus a woman does not deserve freedom.)

The idea behind it is that woman is the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. As a result, many ill practices as social evils started germinating in the society like Sati, Dowry, Purdah, Child marriage, etc. and a dichotomy was established between the idealized image of woman and the bitter reality of her position in the society. To liberate women from these evils many reformers and literary intellectuals- both men and women came forward and raised their voice of protest. They tried to change outlook of the people in India that women, as human beings have equal right of development as men have. They brought about women’s emancipation by asserting that women should also have right of independence, equality and individuality.
At the same time stray ideas of the Western Feminist Movement influenced the culture of India. As Virginia Woolf said,

"Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant......Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in Literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband."  

Education played an important role in bringing awareness among women. With equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points in the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the cultural history of women in India has been eventful. Thus, status of women in India has been subjected to many great changes over the past few millennia.

In this modern era, women in India now participate in all activities such as education, sports, politics, media, art, science and technology etc. It is very surprising that India now has the world's largest number of professionally qualified women.

"We have more working women than any other country in the world handling everything from laser scalps, blinking cockpits, nextgen software, and farm equipment to the steering wheel of a city bus. From assigned roles as teachers, nurses, fish packers, telephone operators and administrative assistants to acquired ones as principals, HR heads, Directors Vice Presidents, MDs and business owners they have inched up and added up to their pay-cheques."
Modern women are stepping into the formal economy & happily knocking down the cultural goalposts on the way. Today woman is aspiring to have more in life and to have a separate identity for herself.

Though the women have overcome many cultural and social barriers but these signs of change are more visible in urban areas. However, a majority of women still face domestic violence, sexual exploitation, rape, dowry, death, female infanticides, illiteracy, labour etc. They are still bonded in the chains of misfortune. Atrocities are committed against women of all ages around the world and unfortunately justice has never been served for most of these women. Trafficking for commercial or sexual exploitation or forced labour, sadly, is the new form of fastest growing criminal activity. Moral decline is rampant in our country and this shows a lack of morality and self respect and the people forget their civic sense. A civic sense also includes respect towards fellow beings irrespective of their colour, gender or creed and the willingness to help those in need. Indians are quite proceed of their heritage and culture, songs and poems have been written about the virtues and beauty of women and the love and respect bestowed on them but what happens in real life is something totally different. A few men in our society fail to show these respect and socially accepted kind of love affection for women of all ages. That’s why there came a great change in men-women relationship in the society.
As literature is the mirror of the society. So, the purpose of feminist writing in India is finding out solutions to women’s problems and to create awareness among the women-folk of the society. In the novels of the women in India we come across a varied hue of Indian women- traditional, both traditional and modern and the ultra modern non-conformists. Kamala Markandaya focuses on the traditional women who retain their individuality by following old values & customs. Nayantara Sahgal portrays women who face challenges in their quest for self-fulfillment. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s women constitute yet another group which proclaims to be modern and refuse to conform. They have a fascination for modernity but have tinges of tradition too. Arundhati Roy brings into focus women who are traditional, oppressed, exploited and tortured in the name of tradition. Apart from these novelists Shobha De’s women are ones who form a new and highly intriguing group- they are daring, educated, unconventional, shrewd, rich and self obsessed with loose morals.

With these positive changes in the societal culture like economic independence, career orientation and full-throated freedom, a large population of women does not dare to destroy their inter-personal relationships. Marriage and family still have their own significance. Though a woman desires equal front with men but believe in caring for others with empathy and love. She wants to project her image as an individual, free from all kinds of conservative thinking but does not seek to overthrow her social obligations.
Shobha De puts this notion upside down by portraying significant changes which are visible in her women characters. She successfully discovers a new class of women who have started flourishing among rich and mighty social strata. These new women aspire for everything that gives them extreme power and equal footing with their male counterparts. They are ready to make every compromise as long as they can get to their desired goal. There is a strong sense of individualism in them. These women are all out to compete and excel in almost every field which was previously men's territory. This ‘new woman’ of Shobha De, is ready to fight her way against all odds coming in her way in fulfilling her aspirations. She rebels against the existing moral codes and social norms which either in theory or in practice tends to relegate woman to a secondary position. Her happiness results in the breaking up of family and interpersonal relationships with the family. She develops such relationships where there is lack of trust and compatibility among the partners.

These modern women love to be treated like queens wherever they go. They command, attention and indulgence from the people they come in contact with. They follow all the modern trends like driving the trendiest cars; going into expensive hotels to wine and dine; shopping and travelling abroad. These women do not have any fix time for retuning home like the traditional women who do not move out of their houses except for marketing or going to their offices if they happen to be working women and coming back at the fix time. The
morals of these new women are questionable as they appear to have thrown their chastity out of their windows and share bed with a chain of lovers. In her novels, Shobha De portrays these women with great enthusiasm and accuracy. By portraying these characters she has risen to fame and glory, is only the way to gain cheap popularity. It is a mistaken path as she is not at all showing any concern to the women’s cause and their victimization.

These new women are calculative and use men as a means of an end, the end being the fulfillment of their aim to become rich, famous and independent. These women use men as their ladder to acquire riches and fame. They show tremendous self confidence in taking up all challenges to attain their desired goals. These women usher in a change in the customary attitude to moral values and demand a new definition of the woman's image. Thus, Shobha De reshapes her women characters as aggressive blasters of the male ego and male hierarchy. In short, the social system based on male domination is seriously threatened and called into question. Shobha De's women,

"symbolise the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality, that characterised modern age." 8

In 1997, the article entitled "Feminist-New style" published in Harper's magazine declared,

“a newly evolved modern be a composite figure, a boyish girl who combines the flapper's physical freedom, sexuality and stamina with feminist self assertiveness and traditional domestic feminity, a woman
who can happily combine pleasure, career and marriage. To the advance young man of the time, this new woman seems the perfect companion—fearless, bright and eager to participate in work, in play, in marital sex”.

Though Shobha De has tried to model her women characters as per the above definition, but they do not fit in this frame completely. Her women characters are neither self-assertive nor they combine career and marriage. They cannot be called as perfect companions in the marital sex as they look for sex outside marriage. The women characters in Shobha De’s novels are full of aspirations and highly individualistic in nature. They do not submit to the age-old traditional values and social practices. De is tireless and unhindered in depicting the life-styles of the rich aristocrats in general and women in particular.

The present chapter aims at analyzing the presentation culture in two novels of Shobha De—Sisters and Sultry Days. Both the novels present a picture of corrupt urban culture where human relationship has lost its all values. Shobha De is renowned for bold and frank style of writing. She explored the lives of bored housewives and their loveless rich husband and family. These two novels mirror the life styles of the elite and the middle classes of urban world. Her style of discussing woman’s issue in her novel is quite challenging and untraditional.
The novel *Sisters* deals with the psychic conflict of woman protagonist who is caught between a personal self and a societal self. Sisters is a story of the life of young men and women of the urban world where love and virtues are dead. At the same time, it is a tale about emotional bond between two sisters, Mallika and Alisha. They are the daughters, one legitimate and the other illegitimate, of big time business man Hiralal who dies at the beginning. The story revolves around the corrupt urban world of business in Bombay. It is full of sex, betrayal, hatred, intrigue and corruption. Shobha De successfully depicts evils of corrupt urban culture. *Sisters*, is the story about two lusty half sisters- Mallika and Alisha- who are in keen competition to outdo each other in the highly corrupt world of big business.

After the death of her parents in an air-crash *Mallika Malhotra* or Mikki decides to handle her father’s business which is on the brink of collapse. It is quite challenging for Mikki to establish the industries to success. She renounces all her girlish dreams of going back to America, and takes up the tough job of controlling and running her sprawling industries. Thus we find the new women who are too ambitious with strong motivation to define the world in their own terms. In the character of Mallika, Shobha De portrays those rich, intelligent and smart, women who prove themselves as being not inferior to men but superior to and even better than men. They have no limits to aspire and once they achieve their goal they set new targets to quire with no relationship to come up as an obstacle. Mikki
Hiralal and Alisha Hiralal are highly ambitious and heads strong women who jump into the competitive world of high level business. Mikki's handling of her father's huge business empire after his death is remarkable. It is a tough job for a young meek and weak woman like her to become a business tycoon but she accepts the challenge bravely and succeeds. In the words of novelist herself-

"Mallika Hiralal was all set to make her own way into the corporate world as the undisputed queen of a cluster of companies her father had built from scratch".10

Good sense dawns on her as she realises that instead of running them alone she had better invite her sister Alisha (the daughter from same father but different mother) to join her and handle the business together. Initially, Alisha is hostile to Mikki because she has received huge wealth from her father enough for her to lead a luxurious life.

Mikki faces hard times to save her industries from going nearly bankrupt but she is filled with determination to save them. Her cousin Shanay advises her to borrow money from her rich fiance Navin. But Navin fails to help her as he is so dependent on his mother for his action. Irked by his attitude Mikki calls off her engagement with her. To come out of her financial anxiety, she marries Binny Malhotra, a middle aged man and a big business tycoon who woos her with extravagant luxury and attention. She transfers all her property to her beloved husband with the hope that it would facilitate better business
transactions. But nothing of that kind happens. Instead her marriage and life becomes miserable. Binny no longer allows her to go to office. He even commands her to stay at home.

Mikki finds that she cannot fulfill her dream of becoming a successful business tycoon with such a person who has no regard for her individuality. She realises that there is no future, as a submissive woman with Binny. She decides to give divorce to Binny. After her divorce, she turns out to be a changed woman. Leaving all her familial responsibilities behind, she transforms herself into a social butterfly and turns her attention to her sister Alisha who too is living like a free bird.

Initially, Alisha hates Mikki for capturing all her father’s love due to which she feels herself neglected. She serves as a foil to Mikki and imitates her in almost everything. She feels happy whenever Mikki is in trouble. She even mixes with Mikki’s former boy friend Navin, as it gives her immense pleasure to acquire whatever belongs to Mikki. Then Alisha gets involved with Dr. Kurien, who is a married man with two children. She becomes so crazy in her relationship with this man that she becomes a drug-addict. She becomes a total introvert after her mother’s death but Mikki comes to rescue her in such difficult times and helps her to overcome her odd times. Both the woman, finally reconcile with each other and decide to face the world together as sisters.
Shobha De once commented on the onset of new millennium that "women no longer hold half the sky, but the whole." Therefore Shobha De’s women crave for loneliness; they believe that in the state of being single, they can experience independence and live life on their own terms. Their loneliness is a part of their perception of living a beautiful life, alone and independently. Here Mikki and Alisha believe in the futility of seeking friendship with men. They find solace and new happiness in each other’s company. They resolve to face the world together as strong and capable women who want to determine their own future with or without the help of any men.

In another novel Sultry Days, Shobha De deals with the women’s world in a new outlook. The women characters in the novel are crazy for men; they challenge men and beat them at their own game. But here the women are not just the blind hitters but they are committed and want equal response from men. Nisha, the leading woman, loves Deb despite his shabby appearance and dirty habits. Both Deb (God) and Nisha wants to achieve desired goals of money and power, but through different means. Deb, after tasting power and money, during his association with an art magazine ‘Plume’, shifts his sole interest to get name and fame.

Contrary to his attitude Nisha wants everything in life to be achieved through sheer labour. She shuns the fast life into which she can step any time, being a part of this high society. She doesn’t like God’s new way of life which has begun sowing the seeds of discord.
and estrangement between them. Their relationship nearly comes to an end after Deb starts caring less and less for his self-respect.

Feeling that God is no longer committed to their relationship, Nisha decides to live life in her own way. She blames Yashwantbhai for the unwelcome change in God. Yashwantbhai is an ordinary clerk in the fisheries department but he rises to a powerful position on account of his relations with underworld, ruthless brokers and unprincipled politicians. Nisha blasts the dark world of Yashwantbhai with whom God has tied up. She exposes Yashwantbhai and also his underworld connections in her write-ups. Nisha’s bold step is supported by her mother and also by a social activist Pratimaben who unravels and brings to public notice Yashwantbhai’s atrocities on his former mistress Pramila.

Unlike Shobha De’s other women characters Nisha emerges as a strong, determined and fearless woman who is ready to face any danger that may come her way. God also has no longer strong hold over her. Nisha is now independent and seeks to have a link with social welfare of common man & woman especially working middle class. She realises that there are evil forces in the world she has to face. But she has necessary strength to resist the nasty painter Iqbal who tries to rape her.

In both the novels Shobha De’s women present a new pattern of values that has come into light with the coming of this new breed of women who are independent and self-obsessed. The conservative
traditional values have undergone a total change with much changed interpersonal relationships and moral values. These women do not want to attain individual freedom by following traditional rules and conventions rather they develop their own self-made morality and interpersonal relationships. The cultural and moral values have undergone a total change. Manifesting their new pattern of values, these women characters can be perceived and regarded as characterless in the Indian society. These women aspire for dreams and there is no limit to their fantasies and dreams.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary-

'Morality in a way is the sum total of values of people at a particular time. Morals means to be concerned with principles of right and wrong behaviour' 12

Mikki and Alisha in Sisters are free birds who do not hesitate in changing men to men to fulfill their desire and aspirations. These women pursue males for their physical gratification. Mikki successfully flirts with Shanay who in cherishing her only ‘was dreaming a hopeless dream’ but still fails to get ‘her out of his system.’ (438) Navin, her fiancée, when fails to respond to her wishes, she breaks off her engagement with him. She accepts Binny Malhotra’s entry into her life and begins to enjoy uninhibited sex with him. She breaks all the taboos and feels “liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon.”(486) Alisha, another character indulges in free sex fearlessly using men as a plaything or an
instrument whenever required. She openly flirts with Navin and Dr. Kurien to fulfill her bodily needs. Navin is their common boyfriend. Alisha enjoys sex with Navin as she knows that Navin has relationship with Mikki in the past. It is an act of revenge, not an act of love or sex. Her relationship for Dr. Kurien who attends her in hospital is purely physical as the doctor has his wife and children. Alisha represents the author’s own desire for liberation for women in sexual matters.

“It is important for women to talk about it. Our mother endured it silently because it was a taboo subject. Nobody was interested in women’s view on sex...It is a kind of catharsis.” [Survival Tactics] 13

Shobha De seems to say that sex and sensuality are a part of life and in order to accept life one has to affirm sensuality. She is not concerned with the traditional concept of morality and purity in love. There are bold descriptions of the sexual encounters between these two characters and their playmates. Some descriptions are too open and vulgar that offends our sensibility and distracts our attention. It will not be wrong to say that Shobha De’s novels border on pornography and ‘Sisters’ bear testimony to it as both the leading characters Mikki and Alisha express an undiminishing, insatiable physical appetite without having any compunction or regret about it. Having thus projected both her central characters, Shobha De sensationaly underlines the modern women’s insistence to obtain social acceptance for a free expression of her libido.
Nisha, in Sultry Days with a tinge of dislike narrates about this new group of women:-

"They carried the awesome weight of a M.B.A. degree (I.I.M Ahemdabad or any of the Harvard) on their padded shoulders. These were no nonsense women who had 'Take me seriously' written all over them. They even wear business suits to work and carried burgundy coloured briefcases........Even the married ones instead on being addressed as 'Ms' or stuck to their maiden names. 14

Another character Pratima, a Nagpur woman, her character very much embodies the new woman; she has everything a woman could aspire for- a husband with a well paid job, lovely children and even a two-wheeler to move around. She also has talent for writing poetry. But she leaves her family to make a niche for herself in the high society of Mumbai. She gets her poems published in English translation and aspires for money and fame. She divorces her husband and leaves her home with her two daughters to become free from all scruples. But unfortunately she meets Yashwantbhai and becomes her mistress and a victim of his lust. When she becomes pregnant, she is threatened by Yashwantbhai to go into hiding but saved by Pratimaben and Nisha’s mother Nisha with Pratimaben exposes Yashwantbhai.

This new generation of women emerges out with new standards and values which has come into existence due to excessive exposure to westernized education, wealth, power, name and fame. These
women are slowly raising their heads and aspire for more comfort, more wealth and more independence. This new generation of women are fashion loving and shows behavioral traits similar to western society. Today, even the media is focusing on sexy bodies or physical features demanding attraction of all. This tendency gives rise to many health and beauty clubs, beauty parlours, massage parlours as this new woman is concerned for her looks and clothing. Shobha De also portrays keen interest of her women characters to enhance their facial beauty, body figure and fashionable clothing with which the women of middle as well as high society are quite familiar.

Mikki shows her sexy dressing styles even in white sari when she goes to the gathering before her father’s funeral-

"Mikki struggled into her mother’s sari. She wasn’t comfortable wearing saris.....looked at herself in the mirror, she debated about whether or not line her eyes with kohl stick. She didn’t feel herself till she had her ‘eyes on’ as she put it. She created a small bindi with a kaajal pencil between her brows and adjusted her lacy bra so that the strips wouldn’t show." (13)

At another occasion of an evening party arranged by her fiancee Navin’s movie star friends, Mikki is suggested by Navin to wear something glamorous and glittering. She takes up his suggestion and purchases a new dress-quite sexy and modern looking.

"Mikki had settled for a fuschia, off-the-shoulder evening dress (One of her New York buys) and combined it with contrasting emeralds from her
mother's jewellery box. Her hair was pulled back into a sleek chignon, which made her look older and more sophisticated...... she was dabbing on her mother's favourite perfume, shalimar, and surveying her image in a full length mirror”. (83)

Similar attitude and sense of aesthetics (Concerned with beauty and art) can be seen in the woman characters in her novel Sultry Days, Kazen, is a rich housewife who takes pride in her exotic good looks. She uses her house like a show room and always ready to sell off her antiques and furniture to her guests who happen to praise them. Shona, is the model from London, known all about the beautiful women characters and actresses "from Cleopatra to Sridevi". To look different and no less attractive she wears a skillfully out wig to hide a major flaw in her beauty. But ironically, her 'forehead is as large as papad'. (782), Lotika believes that she was an apsara in her earlier life and that she disturbed a rishi's meditation by her ravishing beauty. Maitreyee represents 'the available' Bombay woman ' brazen, bold brasses" (72). She has hair streaked with gold and purple but she wears a swirling ghagra with a backless choli.

In the novel 'Sultry Days', Nisha gives his father's idea of a well dressed wife as-

"She had to be draped in pastel coloured chiffons worn with a sleeveless blouse. Jewellery to be restricted to a discreet row of pearls, a diamond ring, bracelet watch and small ear tops, matching shoes and hand bag were an absolute must. Also manicured nails (fingers and
toes) and lacquered hair. Makeup, especially lipstick, was of vital importance since he firmly believed it is a sign of sophistication and no stylish woman should ever be seen without it." (SD 32)

Thus, in both the novels Sisters and Sultry Days the women characters are drawn after the modern lifestyle leaving their traditional image far behind and a new set of moral values has been framed by these women as they revel in their glittering aristocratic world. Their morals may be questionable in the eyes of women or people belonging to lower strata of the society but among their own circle everything they do is the most normal form of womanly behaviour.

Marriage is considered a game for security and convenience. Institutions of family and marriage have come under tremendous strain in the modern times. It is affected badly by aping western culture which whips up passion and sexuality in our Indian culture too. The rampant promiscuity in sexual relations causes disintegration of family and results in divorce. If the wife is not happy with her husband she can pack up and go away any moment. In most of the cases in De's novels, women lead immoral lives stealthily and also want to cherish social respectability. Winning the right to enter the labour market, women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes a marriage less necessary and has increased the divorce rate.

In the novel Sisters, when Mikki doesn’t get any financial support from her fiancée Navin, she quickly breaks off her
engagement with her despite a lot of society talk. Influenced by western consumerism, marriage is also viewed as commercial affairs. A husband should fulfill the economic demands of his wife and if he is unable to do so, he does not fit in the picture of the husband she looks for. Mikki needs someone who can help her anchor the sinking Hiralal empire. She finds her target in Binny Malhotra who had,

"money, power and access to anybody he wanted to meet in the government. The only thing he didn't have was acceptability in society. It was one thing Binny craved for more than anything else. And no one was going to deny him the status of being Mallika Hiralal's husband-and the owner of Hiralal Industries"(458)

Even after finding his cunningness, Mikki has no choice but to overlook his real character due to exigency of having to save her failing business. Mikki's friend Amy advises her to marry Binny-

"The quickest way to shoot to the top is to tie up with Malhotra. And I'm being very practical when I tell you this- what's the worse thing that could happen in that alliance? A disastrous marriage can always be put behind you darting......divorce isn't what it used to be"(468)

But after her marriage with Binny she finds that Binny has a mistress Urmi with her two children. Binny turns out to be a dominating husband, putting a complete stop to Mikki's career as a business woman. When Mikki expresses her desire to go to office he denies her and turns her into a slave and she has nothing but to
submit herself as traditional Indian wife. But she is shocked when the final blow comes to her as divorce from Binny.

For the new woman, marriage is a means of manipulating business interests, not of promoting welfare of the family or society. The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom with no notion of marital fidelity. Just for the sake of economic security men & women take marriage like a contract of give and take rather than any emotional or sentimental bond. There is a lack of trust and compatibility between husband and wife. There is no such word like ‘commitment’ in this relationship as it is devoid of emotional warmth, leading to divorce and breaking of family ties. "Marriages are made in heaven" seems to be an absurd in the modern world of Shobha De’s novels.

Marriage is not regarded as essential in Sultry Days, the protagonist male Deb remarks- "Who knows about marriage- Sharriage... I'm happy as I am" (SD 27)

Deb does not want to marry Nisha, even after his prolonged affair with her and he feels marriages are irrelevant and useless. When he agrees to marry Nisha at one point in the novel, he presents his idea of marriages as only impractical and suffocating. He says-

"If you want, I don't mind a shaddi- waadi-I know that will make you feel better, Theek hai-we can be bourgeois and go through with that marriage rubbish.......Give me my dal-roti, a warm bed, twice a week maalish and a daily screw. That's all I expect" (SD 159-60)
Another female character in the novel, Pratimaben, meets her Ahmedabad-based businessman husband only once a week, calls him her 'weekend husband' and passes her time in her social works and pilgrimages. Shobha De depicts the urban world where man and woman do not become one in marriage; they merely act as partners in sex. Freedom of urban culture, uncontrolled passion for sex and lust destroys the beautiful lives of men and women and finally they get frustration in life. The high flying modern urban culture is destroying Indian culture and tradition. Money has taken place of human affection. Materialistic success of urban world has wiped out all human values and resulting in vulture like urban culture where all human relationships have lost their values.

In Indian culture, family stands for love and loyalty. Family is the strongest part in determining who we are and there is a great magic in the moments of sharing, caring, loving and giving in a family. Whether the family is primary family where we are born or the secondary one that we make after marriage, it is one such platform where we share our greatest joys, deepest sorrows, most significant milestones and most heartfelt hopes and disappointments. There are many moments which give us contentment and realization of true happiness that every soul desires. Whether it is the birth of a child, or death of a parent, marriage of a sibling, housewarmings, operations, festivals, birthday celebrations etc.- all such incidents punctuate a life. Shobha De says, "The family culture I grew up cherishing is one I've tried to pass to my children. Honesty and integrity at all times."
Shobha De looks hypocritical what she describes family in her life what she presents in her novels, as her novels show the degradation of family culture and the interpersonal relationships within family in a fragile state.

Here, De mirrors modern urban culture where family lost its all values and children witness the parental indifference and seems least connected to family. Through her women characters, she focuses on this fragile state clearly. Mikki in *Sisters* doesn’t show any sentimentalism at the death of both her parents and refuses to mourn at her loss. Her maid Gangubai tries to stir her emotions by sympathizing in the words - "Baby...God has dealt you a severe blow. You are orphaned.... what worse fate can a child suffer?", she appears stern and orders her, "Go and get me a coffee"(410) Mikki hardly seems to have been shocked at the tragic death of her parents and looks focused and controlled.

On the contrary, she gets down to her father’s business with strong and stable headed approach. She restarts the business and determines to run it on her own terms. When Ramankaka, a confidant of her father's business tries to patronize her, she suggests him not to give his advise for free and takes her decisions boldly. Mikki shrugs him aside and makes an emphatic decision-

"Thank you for your advice, Ramankaka. 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.....But I can change just about everything else....and I
intend to..... This is going to be my show and I intend running it none of my terms. If these solicitors aren't prepared to talk turkey with me, I'll sack them. That goes for the accountants and anybody else who wishes to treat me like a simple-minded, spoilt little girl out to play being a business woman. My genes are the same as my father's even if my gender list'(430)

In the novel Sultry Days, Shobha De exposes the hollowness and the superficialities of the so-called modern women and their families. We find a shocking description of Baroohas and their relation with their children as-

“The Baroohas had one anthem- ‘Our children terrify us’ which they did. Their son was nineteen, their daughter seventeen and between them they had succeeded in terrorizing their parents to a point where they were actually frightened to being in the same room with their offspring. Servants reported with the glee that often Vikki baba threw assorted objects at his mother and called her names ranging from ‘nympho’ to ‘bitch’. The daughter, Sweety, adopted different tactics- she killed her parents with cruelty. Cold-blooded mental cruelty. It was a constant refrain, an unending taunt, ‘where were you when I got my first period? Where were you when they threw me out at school? Where were you when I met with an accident? Where were you when my boy friend knocked me up and I nearly bled to death on some quack’s operating table?’..... ”(SD 168)
The Baroohas feel terrified of their children because their children actually act as mirrors wherein they can see their own images and the superficialities of their existence. They do not want to confront the shallowness of the kinds of lives they lead and their children’s faces compel them to introspect. After the publication of ‘Sultry Days’, Shobha De has said “finally a book by me that my children can read.” What examples does she set in front of her children? What moral values she pass on to them and other people of the society?

The wide readership of Shobha De’s novels does not approve her ideology of defining culture on her own terms. Her ability to convey the sentiments, mentality and life style of this new class of women is not sufficient enough to attract the attention of the middle class. Through her vivid expressions De reveals the inner world of her upper class socialite women. However they are clear headed about their aspirations and the ways to achieve their goals by creating a new identity in the society but this world of women appear to be reckless. Their promiscuous sexual behaviour not only brings a bad name of being the women of loose morals or values but also does not provide satisfaction in life. With their individuality and personal freedom, they are leading immoral lives with no sense of commitment and understanding to their boyfriend or husband. In spite of a bond of trust and love, they use them as a thing of entertainment and fun and once get bored they throw them away like anything and continue their affairs with another man.
The image of men in both the novels is generally negative. In *Sisters*, Navin creates his relationship with both the Sisters Alisha and Mikki and ditches them. Binny Malhotra marries Mikki to enslave her and have his relationship with Urmi from whom he has two children. Dr Kurien has an extra marital affair with Alisha and leaves her as drug addict after enjoying fully with her.

In another novel *Sultry Days*, the image of man is generally negative. Deb, the protagonist does not want to marry Nisha even after his prolonged affair with her. Nisha’s father who appears rather "artificial and little ridiculous" (57) does not resist from having affairs with younger women including his Sindhi secretary. Amar is endowed with the "gift of the gab" and his style of functioning is “bull doggish and belligerent.” 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’.(202) Then there is Lucio, who is interested in everything including "lipstick, pimples, sarees". As Nisha tells about him:

"He wanted to know everything. Little things...... Lucio was involved and attentive. He noticed when my hair was shampooed or if, occasionally, lipstick strayed to my teeth...... Lucio noticed my cloths, my make up, even my pre-menstrual pimples."(SD 67)

Pebble, another character is a 'thickset and bull like' has a wild reputation. He is described as 'a rough talking hunk with wolf like eyes
Iqbal, a shrewd man, has a terrible weakness for fresh faced college girls.

“His hunger for beautiful girls matched his thirst for tea. He loved both equally, though often the tea scored.” (SD 42-48)

Shobha De not only portrays the negative images of men and women in her society but also focuses on the hollowness of the interpersonal relationships—man-woman relationship as well as relationship between fellow man and woman. In Sisters, Alisha addresses Mallika with abusive words like “fucking charity” and “bitch”. Dr. Kurien calls Alisha a “wild cat” and Alisha abuses him as “f rigging bastard” and “wimp”. (299) Binny Malhotra abuses his mistress, “Saali Urmi kidhar gayee? Bulao usko.” (159) Shobha De has used the similar abusive language in Sultry Days too as enshrined in Deb’s assertion about woman that “once a bitch, always a bitch...and one bitch is as good as another.” (SD 154) Nisha calls Deb “Yashwantbhai’s chamcha and pimp” and “a spineless lackey” (SD 226)

By showing such an abusive culture, what kind of feminism does Shobha De practice?

Moreover, the men and women in the urban society have no limits of their love making and promiscuous life. While talking about equality the women, whatever these new modern upper class women do is a reaction to their immediate surroundings. The modern system of education, values and life styles awakens them to claim equal rights
with men. This new women defy social conventions as their male counterparts are unable to provide them an equal status and position in the society. This group of women come into bold existence due to maladjustment in their life by their partners results in breaking of social rules and accepting new values and morals. Morality is re-defined by them with changed times and socio-cultural milieu. Morality no longer implies demarcation of accepted sexual boundaries but emphasizes values which are reprieved from the action of people in the changing social atmosphere.

Shobha De is simply aping western culture is her novels. Her characters are only individuals and their individual experiences cannot be generalised. There characters are modelled on the western culture which is highly individualistic and sans values; for them morals and values are like obstacles created by society. These obstacles are like hindrances in the way of achieving complete freedom from all the social responsibilities and obligations.

Shobha De’s approach is against Indian cultural tradition which is value based and has its own value system unlike western tradition. Indian society poses restriction to reckless and immoral deeds/behaviour by establishing institutions like marriage and family. Such value system is passed from generation to generation and that is why every individual here is a social being enjoying individual existence within society. In India individual identity is well preserved by the society. Society is the first need because if there were no society
where will be the individual? In the absence of a social setup
individuals are like horses that will run amuck in a limitless jungle
and get killed by big canines. If there is a limit set for them they may
run but will come back to the fold later and remain safe. Thus, ‘Indian
culture’ set the limits of the individual within the framework of a
society and individual existence is only possible within this limited
space.

In this way Shobha De’s novels call for a redefining of all the
cultural set of values in the light of the fast growing breed of new-ultra
group of ambitious women whose aspirations have no limit. She is
towards creating a corrupt urban culture, in which she is more
inclined to the western ideology rather than Indian. She is redefining
the roles of the modern woman whom she calls ‘new woman’ and
putting forth a ‘new culture’.
References:


3. Ibid.


14. Shobha De, ‘Sultry Days’ (Penguin, New Delhi, 1994) p.32