No doubt Shobha De has been able to throw significant light on the inner life of men and women belonging to the glittering world of the affluent section of Indian society. On one hand she has brought out the follies of highly liberated new woman and on the other redefined the terms ‘liberated’ in her novels. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that Shobha De has made a marvelous entry in the Indian literary scene with her first novel ‘Socialite Evenings’ in 1989 as a bestseller. Also, her fiction has got tremendous response in India and all over the world but as far as the content of her novels is concerned it can be labelled as, “high society pot pouri, and voyeuristic servings of souped-up, four-wheel drive sex-in-all directions”.¹

After analysing the thematic concerns of her novels we find that they are highly complex with narrow objectives. Being the member of elite upper class of Mumbai, she has tried to bring out every little secret of men and women of her society, but her experiences cannot be generalised. Her fiction is not concerned with the lot of women. Shobha De cannot be termed as feminist as her writings do not voice any kind of protest rather there is a strong sense of freedom in them. Shobha De’s women have been liberated from the ‘feminine self’ i.e. female attributes like dutiful daughter, loyal wife, loving mother and responsible social being. The women she chooses belong to that “tinsel town where everything is silvery yet their personal lives are full of dark
“crevices and gloomy corridors.” Thus, Shobha De shows only one-sided and narrow picture of the society.

Feminist writing in India aims at developing the idea of an ideal woman along moral and spiritual lines which means commitment to a system of values. But with Shobha De, no character is worthy of sympathy, compassion or admiration as her characters represent an entirely different value system. Feminists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Despande reflect the position of a ‘new woman’ who reveals moral and spiritual urge for companionship rather than competing with men in all fields with dominance. Their basic concerns are deeper than merely seeking equality with men. In their view, a woman is ‘new’ when she believes in asserting her own personality and insisting upon her own rights as a woman. This ‘woman’ analyses and reflects upon her position essentially as a woman in the scheme of things which includes the social, moral and spiritual fields. In short their writings grapple with more fundamental problems of women and aspire towards higher ideals of womanhood. But, we find that Shobha De has deviated from this stream of development as she fails to bring out these essential traits of the ‘new woman’. Her modern women do not have moral and spiritual urge for companionship rather they are more inclined towards personal freedom and glamour. Her characters reveal the existence of glamour and modernity at the core and feminism only at the periphery of their psyche. Shobha De’s characters are the women, who to male eyes symbolize nothing but only attraction and physical charm.
Indian feminists are primarily concerned with the recognition of woman as a being, an autonomous being. They want woman to realize herself through self-analysis. Thus ‘quest for one’s own identity’ is the most common theme of many Indian feminists. Women in earlier works of feminism feel helpless and suffer from rootlessness when they go through the ‘identity crisis’. These women who are facing loss of their identity try to analyze themselves by self assertion. Though their individuality and social recognition is lost, but these women do not change their basic personality and preserve their identity as a wife, a mother and also a human being. Most of the women in Shobha De’s novels belong to elite class and have full economic freedom and recognition. Her women characters are mostly economically independent and socially emancipated. In every walk of life right from earning a living to most of blatant issues of sexuality they are on a level of parity with their male counterparts.

These women try to expose themselves and try to compete with men in all arenas like power, position and sexuality, Shobha De, by simply exposing negative and unacceptable side of their personality turns them into ‘abberations’.

Another concern of Indian feminists is to influence Indian women positively and bring changes in the outlook of the people for the better. In order to do so they portray the new Indian woman in their novels and focus on her dilemma. This ‘new Indian woman’ chooses to remain in the family but at the same time questions the
validity of traditions and customs that circumscribe women in narrow slots. Such ‘a woman’ has the power of reinterpreting old myths and bringing changes for the betterment of the society. Comparatively, Shobha De’s women visualize a kind of rebellion against the old culture with the emergence of a breed apart which challenges men’s hierarchy is every sphere of life. They want to be free from all kinds of responsibilities and obligations and live like ‘butterflies’. Shobha De by portraying such womenfolk in her novels is actually betraying the cause of women, as identity and recognition cannot be gained by simply exposing one’s physical charms or instincts or changing one man for men.

Cultural Feminists try to identify the deep rooted causes leading to oppression of women and endeavour to remove such causes. They try to bring about a change in the social milieu wherein women are accepted as equals in all respects. Women in India are equal to men in sharing of rights, opportunities and also responsibilities in the process of evolution of human society. Here, government has also helped them to rise from their secondary position by guaranteeing their rights in the constitution of India. Men and women both are hopeful for eradication of any distinction of gender, class or position. But Shobha De is following and imposing western culture for the man-woman relationship in her novels. She has given a new dimension to man-woman relationship where we find no mutual cooperation and respect for each other. The women in her novels consider men as the source of enjoyment. They borrow this attitude from the male world and treat
men’s value systems as their’s, as men for them are equally immoral and irresponsible. Men as well as women both have illicit relationships outside marriage; they may even boast about it or just forget about it; or might even publicize it and parade their sexuality. These ‘women’ of Shobha De are out to tell men that whatever men do, they (women) too are entitled to do the same.

“They keep a string of men tied under their belts, so that when one fails to live up to their expectations, they can move onto the next one.”

These women in the disguise of equality want total freedom from social obligations like family and marriage and try to indulge in reckless promiscuous deeds only. The life of such women cannot set an example for others as it is not the right path for women’s emancipation. Thus, Shobha De herself has forgotten the aim of feminism in India and question arises-“What is she trying to protest through her writings?” or “What kind of equality is she trying to achieve?”

Feminism in India is never visualised as an exclusively all-female world where men have only peripheral functions. Feminists here believe that feminism is necessarily pro-woman but it must not be anti-man. Thus, Indian feminists deny separatist stance and try to create an environment where men and women are valued equally. But Shobha De portrays her male characters with all kind of negative qualities. According to her-
“Indian men make the world’s lousiest lovers . . . They are high on ego, and low on performance”\(^5\).

In her novels, it is a world that is carved and shaped by women. These women reveal an uninhibited universe where the male is pushed into a corner and forced to live a secluded life with subdued existence. Shobha De’s women do not believe in mutual sharing and compromise in their relation to men rather they defy men’s existence by taking up radical lesbianism or an uninhibited sexual play with different males. In this way, Shobha De is trying to establish the notion of ‘Polar Opposites’ by putting aside the hope of ‘Co-existence’ and building an environment where men and women will be poles apart from each other. Thus, as long as any half of the humanity is denied decent and dignified life it will be a far cry to hope for a better world.

Another point that deviates Shobha De’s writing from being called as feminist writing is ‘Too much emphasis on sex’. Her female characters are sexual orgies who symbolize absolute freedom of womankind from all forms of patriarchal inhibitions. Due to the portrayal of women as sex object, sex seeker and a sex rebel, she gains lot of unpleasant remarks like “Porn De Again” “Queen of Quickies”, “Vamp Ideology” and even an international magazine dubbed her as “Jackie Collins of India”.\(^6\) Most of her novels are lust-laced work of sexploitation. Her characters project their passions onto
others as female power and use them to satisfy their carnal desires in order to deconstruct the male ego.

Shobha De’s novels delineate women who would like to be eroticized as objects. These women express an undiminishing, insatiable physical appetite without having any remorse or regret about it. Shobha De projects the modern woman’s insistence to obtain social acceptance for a free expression of her sexuality. For them ‘Sex’ is the only way to establish themselves as assertive, domineering and successful. For them the only way a woman can reach the ladder of success is ‘sex’. Shobha De believes in ‘SEXPLAY’ and calls it “the bedrock of all relationships”.\(^7\) As her women characters think and talk about it openly and do not hesitate to take all the initiative. They would like to view themselves as erotic objects as eroticism for these pervert women is either a means to regain their the sexuality or an expression of their illicit and carnal urge. Shobha De presents women with lot of pot passion’ illicit and carnal. These women have only one quality that they are sexual being and their interest in life is restricted to sexual activities. ‘Sexuality is their only end and sense in the universe’. By such presentations Shobha De proves herself to be a ‘Sex Orgy’ or ‘Sex hungry Maniac’ as,

“pornography in Shobha De’s novels becomes a symptom and symbol of the female’s defiance of a male-regulated female sexuality”.\(^8\)

Shobha De is not a writer but a business woman. She knows what to sell and how to sell, S.E.X. – this three letter word finds a lot
of buyers. Shobha De as a writer is in great demand and her novels are best-sellers due to her masterly art of story telling and putting in slices of factual reality. But her novels cannot be called feminist writings as there is no clear message of emancipation of women in the real sense and her themes are often deviated from the feminine voice. Most of her novels are pulp-fiction, which sell well and read well but they fail to meet the aesthetics of feminism. Her fiction can be dressed up and presented as an extremely marketable product over the media similar to Bollywood masala movies full of violence, stunts and pornographic scenes. A.G. Khan rightly regards, “Her entire acrobatics as an attempt to reduce ‘fiction’ to ‘fucktion’”9 Thus, Shobha De does not exhibit the traits of either liberal feminists or the radical feminists.

Shobha De’s women are highly aspiring and too much preoccupied with sex, money, violence and drugs. These women aspire for everything that gives them power and equal footing with men. For them, a man becomes only a necessary tool to achieve their goals, such desires which do not have an end. They are ready to make every compromise till they can attain their desired goals. These women go in for high flying career like modelling, movies, high power business journalism and advertising. To them marriage is a formality and a matter of personal convenience. If that purpose is not served by marriage they do not hesitate to cast it away and clean their path of undesired obstacles. In doing so, these women become wildly self obsessed and forget that by their wild life style, their own young children’s lives become highly vulnerable to a reckless life style.
Shobha De, married twice herself and a mother of six children, presents a futile marital knot of her characters. On the one hand she talks about social responsibility, family bonds and interpersonal relationships and on the other her women characters deny her own perceptions. Thus Shobha De’s personality is hypocritical in nature as her thoughts are not vindicated by her actions. Thus, we find her a split personality, torn between ‘self’ and ‘a novelist’. There is a huge gulf between what she says and what she practices.

To the feminists the ideal woman is one whose mental horizon is broadened and who is interested in her family more than anything else. Such a woman is capable of bearing social responsibility and can independently arrive at her own decision. But Shobha De’s women are too self-absorbed, they frequently go into a wild race for power and money. De’s presentation of the women belonging to this affluent society is that of a rebel who does not conform either to tradition or to modernity but chooses to attain a different identity, whereby she may not have to follow any social or moral code of conduct.

Aasha Rani in Starry Nights, Karuna in Socialite Evenings, Mikki and Alisha Hiralal in Sisters, Swati in Snapshots and Amrita in Strange Obsession – in none of these character has Shobha De infused the spirit of dignity and self respect or endowed them with intellectual insight. They are incapable of bearing any social responsibility though they are rich career oriented women. There is no widening their mental horizon. For these women marriage is a secondary element in
their lives while career and fulfillment of other personal desires are given topmost priority. This tendency is opposite to Indian cultural feminism. Shobha De does not want her women characters to be self-respecting, dignified or persons with integrity. Her women do not set any example for the women for a better tomorrow as they learn nothing from life. Thus, Shobha De fails to espouse women’s cause and can not be termed ‘feminist’.

Cultural feminists believe that woman is superior to man in virtues and thus she is more evolved than men. This theory when applied to Indian context, we find that woman is spiritually stronger than man and this spiritual strength is used by her to maintain and manage her interpersonal relations by proper understanding. Such a force directs her how to deal with others, how to act and how to manage one’s relations. But Shobha De is following western culture and imposing it on her women characters as they are the masters of their own will and reckless creatures with a new set of social and moral values. They tempt the younger women to enter the same race away from softer and humbler path of womanliness.

Cultural feminism in the west also tends to deconstruct gender system and sex roles but here in India these traits can not be seen by separating men and women as two distinct identities. Indian culture believes in the complimentary roles of male and female. Being in a committed relationships both of them enjoy their individual freedom and sexual desires with mutual respect and understanding for each
other. Extra-marital affairs/illicit sexual relations are still not considered to have a social acceptance in India. Inspired by the feminist movements in the west, Shobha De’s women, in their eagerness for freedom, make a total switch over to the other side, seeking freedom from everything, including their culture. Her women should find freedom not in the western sense and but in conformity with the society they live in without drifting away from their culture.

In Indian urban socio-cultural milieu woman is no longer a victim of patriarchy which subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as inferior to male. Therefore the purpose of feminist writing is to articulate, assert and affirm the ‘feminine self’. The women writers therefore have to write constructively to provide role models for the other women ensuring unsullied dignity and individuality. They need to portray women in such a way that they emerge as strong willed individuals to face life, to share responsibility and not to escape from their social responsibilities.

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

In the light of all the above discussion, we find that Shobha De is not a force to awaken women socially and culturally. She writes with narrow aim and is narrow in her objectives. She shows only one
sided and faded picture of the society, which is a mistaken path as far as cultural feminism is concerned. She provides no solutions or alternatives to the problems the Indian woman facing today rather she invokes the dilemma in her female readers which violently disturbs the concept of feminity in India. Such dilemma leads to frustration, mental break-down and disasters.

Shobha De is not at all a cultural feminist as she has yet to prove her commitment to feminism. This is only possible when she would wean herself away from the lure of pulp fiction that sells well and put off her ‘vamp feministic ideals’. May be her novels sell like ‘hot cakes’ but she has to go a long way to prove herself ‘a feminist’ for which she has to “shed off the popular stigma of being a mere peddler of pornographic fiction.” 11
References:


5. Shobha De, “Uncertain Liaisons” in Khushwant Singh and Shobha De ed. (New Delhi, Viking/ Penguin India, 1993), pp.4 xxv.


7. Shobha De, “Uncertain Liaisons”, pp.208 xxv.

