Summary

**TITLE: THE NOVELS OF SHOBAH DE: A STUDY IN CULTURAL FEMINISM**

Shobha De is one of those Indian English writers who occupy a distinctive place as a journalist as well as novelist in the literary world of India. Her popularity as a novelist rests with her ability to portray sensitive aspects of human life, social and sexual relationship and women’s psychology with a touch of open-heartedness as part of training and influence of the western culture. Although feminism has almost died out in the west on account of manifold social problems faced by women: search for economic stability, social status, single living, need for a reliable and dependable partner, etc. Today feminist attitudes are displayed by young females from the teenaged to forties but after that the search for certainty and stability haunts them and single life becomes a nightmare. Shobha De displays this short-time fashionable attitude which in reference to India is more imaginary than imaginative reality.

In most of her novels, De personifies the dilemma that has dogged many Indian women writers. She is always one of those modern day women authors who are now expressing themselves freely and boldly creating a new image of the woman. De endeavours to present the new woman who is daring, ambitious and aspiring and is obsessed with realizing her dreams and forcing them upon the male dominated world with a view to obtaining a due recognition of her identity. She talks about sex, men and eroticism in no uncertain
terms. It appears that Shobha De’s woman exploits her physical potential more daringly and confronts her male counterpart in every field of activity where the latter had been enjoying unquestioned supremacy and domination through centuries.

The emphasis of the present work is on cultural feminist ideas which have incidentally escaped the eye of the researchers who talked about feminism no doubt but ignored the spirit behind Shobha De’s feminist idea. The present work examines Shobha De’s women characters in the light of cultural feminist theory as practised in India. The entire work has been classified into six chapters and each chapter enables me to assess and evaluate De’s genius as well as failure as a novelist.

The first chapter of this thesis ‘Introduction’ is divided into two parts. The first part begins with a brief historical survey of the Indian novels from the year 1970 to 2000 with special concern for the feminist stance of the novelists of this era. Indian English fiction is a major source for the systematic study of cultural contact and cultural change. Indian feminism is necessarily influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds prevalent here since ages so Indian feminists are bound together by a common cultural backdrop that definitely show marked deviations from that of the western types. In the last 40 years or so Indo-English fiction has flourished and has come to be recognized as an important source of information on Indian people and their culture.
The main concern of this study is the feminist awareness or consciousness that is revealed in the works of the Indian writers especially women writers. In the 20th century, women's writing is considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements as the last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writing.

The importance of focusing on women’s issues is clearly seen in the works of Indian woman over the years. The image of Indian woman in the novels of these women novelists is varied, colourful, intense and wonderfully interesting. This may be because of the fact that these women writers focus mainly on women’s issues of the Indian woman from traditional and modern viewpoints depicting all their desires, anxieties, happiness and sorrow, defeat and victory and focus the woman’s inner world and her position in the society. Women writers from several regions of India have written evocatively about their society and the way it treats its women but as a writer Shobha De differs considerably from other women novelists. She concentrates on the problems of women and deals with psychology in her style of intimate understanding. Her novels indicate the arrival of a new woman eager to defy rebelliously against the well entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. As a result, her women characters are modern, strong and they take bold decisions to survive in society.
In the second part of the first chapter, I have dealt with the shaping influence, life and works of Shobha De. This throws light on the development of her literary sensibility and others opinions about her as a writer. Shobha De a super model, celebrity, journalist and best selling author stands as ‘pioneer’ in the field of popular fiction and ranks among the first to explore the world of urban women in India. Her novels are hugely popular and are critically appreciated but trashed by serious critics as racy and raunchy in style and content. However the numbers they sell make her one of the most widely read English novelists in India. The erotic content of her novels has been somewhat controversial, with some reviewers being sneered of her work while others suggest that she is encountering the taboos held by many women writers. Shobha De is known for her bold and frank style of writing. Love, sex and marriage or its failure are some of the main themes of writing of Shobha De. She mainly deals with the issues concerning the modern society like extra-marital relations and sex in a very bold and unconventional way. She also focuses on the different facets of the urban Indian society. She attempts to project the large society as a whole through her characters.

The next chapter ‘Cultural Feminism’ deals with cultural feminist theory of the west and theorists like Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Fuller and Alice Echols who lay stress on the emotional intuitive side of knowledge, non-violence, caring and cooperation and express an organic world view. The history of Western Feminism is the history of Feminist Movement and then the efforts to
overturn gender inequality. Feminist scholars have divided Feminism’s history into “Three Waves”. The first wave refers to the Suffrage Movement in the early Twentieth century. The second feminism dealt with the inequality of laws, gender as well as cultural inequalities. The Third Wave Feminism refers to the movement of Sexism and the issues related to it. The Cultural Feminism is an offshoot of Radical Feminism. It is ideology of a ‘female nature’ or ‘female essence’ that attempts to revalidate what cultural feminists considers undervalued female attributes. It is also a theory that commends the positive aspects of what is seen as the female character or feminine personality. Cultural Feminists are usually also radical feminists who believe that women are not only essentially different, but in certain ways more evolved than men. Thus, it is a feminist theory of difference that praises the positive aspect of women. Cultural Feminism tends to celebrate women’s love, nurturing abilities, non-violence and emotional intelligence and view these traits as female qualities.

This chapter also focuses on the Indian Cultural Feminist view which has been in the conformity with Indian cultural tradition. In India pre-colonial social structures and women’s role reveal that feminism was theorized differently here than in the West. The colonial reconstruction of Indian Womanhood through social reform movements combined with Indian Traditional idea of ‘powerful woman’ woven into patriarchal culture through religion provided a new cultural space to Indian woman. Here the stark Individualistic Feminism of the West was overpowered by the social and collective
responsibility. Still several social evils as attributes of patriarchal system like Dowry, kinship, casteism, superior status of the male child in the family, kept on haunting the women in general. Therefore, the feminist movement in India emphasized upon spreading an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in the society at work and within the family and conscious action by women and men to change this situation. Interestingly, they were men who initiated social reform movements for women in India. Chief among them were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand, Mahatma Gandhi and writers like Rabindra Nath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattarjee etc.

Women’s participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in the society. With the rise of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian Feminists emerged. They have been spear-heading the woman’s upliftment movement through affirmative action. They have been fighting for gender equality, individual autonomy, control of the female body, reproduction rights, sexuality, and freedom from domestic violence. Among modern Indian feminist writers some names are known as pioneers like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi), Sarojini Sahu (Oriya), Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale etc (English). They have expressed their opinions freely and boldly on variety of themes pertaining to women’s rights and status in the society. They have also talked about sex, men and eroticism in no uncertain terms.
The historical circumstances and the socio-cultural and political set up in India make women’s issues different from western feminist rhetoric. Here, feminine efforts are mostly in the form of reforms rather than revolutionary movements of the West. As the Indian Feminist movement has been in the conformity with Indian cultural tradition, regarding woman’s role in the family in particular and society in general, there is a wider acceptance of her opinion and state. So, feminism in India is deeply rooted in its cultural and traditional values which give it a different colour and taste than the West.

The third chapter ‘Sexism Vs Sexuality’ deals with the elements of sexism and sexuality in three selected novels of Shobha De- Starry Nights, Snapshots and Strange Obsessions. This chapter is devoted to emphasizing the erotic/sexual element in De’s novels and the presentation of creating a new kind of morality in pursuing the goal of becoming rich and famous. Through her women characters she projects insistence to obtain social acceptance for a free expression of her sexual desires. Her women do not hesitate to accept ‘sex’ as an important part of life and take all the initiative. They think and talk about it openly and participate in it actively, turning upside-down the traditional image of woman for whom sex is shameful and a hidden reality. Shobha De boldly asserts the arrival of new women who totally dismiss the existing subordination and passivity. This group of women does not hide their own passions and believes in free show of their physical instincts. Hence, in all the above three novels, Shobha De
portrays the new rebellious women who wants equal footing with man in terms of sexuality. These modern urban women have transformed men from individuals to commodities. They use men to fulfill their insatiate appetite for sex and in doing so they do not care for any code of conduct or moral values.

The fourth chapter ‘Tradition Vs Modernity’ brings out a stark contrast between the tradition and modernity as shown by Shobha De in two of her novels- Socialite Evenings and Second Thoughts. De’s women, whom she calls ‘new woman’ strives to get total freedom from man, if she finds any kind of hindrance or obstacles in achieving their desired goals in life. While carrying on this kind of struggle to achieve her goal, she recklessly overthrows traditionally established rules and societal norms. This ‘new woman’ wants to project herself as an Individual, free from all kinds of familial relations and social responsibilities. She seeks to overthrow matrimonial bondage and adopts new and different perspectives revolting against the old order. Her rebellious craving for individuality results in disintegration of marriage and family. Shattering the traditional image of the Indian woman, as weak, docile person living at the mercy of her partner and following the western tradition, Shobha De presents this ‘liberated modern woman’ very freely and boldly.

The fifth chapter ‘Culture Vs Aspirations’ analyses how far this aspiring ‘new woman’ portrayed by Shobha De is in accordance with Indian culture. Her ‘new woman’ is highly ambitious, frank and
aspiring to create legitimate and respectable space for herself in the society. She even uses her body as an important means to promote her ends caring little about anything else. Sometimes she appears staggering and unbelievable when she shatters traditionally established intuitions such as marriage, interpersonal relationships and the sanctity of family etc. Shobha De’s women are ones who form a new and highly intriguing group-they are daring, educated, unconventional, shrewd, rich and self absorbing with loose morals.

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 individualizing 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.

This chapter also 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 explores 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. These 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’.

The last and concluding chapter evaluates the cultural feminist stance in De’s novels and analyses how she differs other literary writers desiring to arouse the consciousness of the modern women in society. In this chapter, I have tried to project a critical assessment of Shobha De’s talent as a writer with both merits and shortcomings. It weighs pros and cons of Shobha De’s writing capability and what impression she has been able to create on her readers.

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.

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. Shobha De has deviated from the mainstream of development as she fails to bring out the 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. 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. 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. These women try to expose themselves and try to compete with men in all arenas like power, position and sexuality.

Shobha De is following and imposing western culture in 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. 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.

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. 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.

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 as feminist writing 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.
Shobha De’s personality is hypocritical in nature as her thoughts are not vindicated by her actions. 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. Shobha De is not a force to awaken women socially and culturally. She writes with narrow aim and narrow objectives. She shows only one sided fade 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 are facing today rather she invokes the dilemma in her female readers which violently disturbs the concept of femininity in India. Such dilemma leads to frustration, mental break-down and disasters.

Thus, Shobha De is not at all a cultural feminist as she has yet to prove her commitment to feminism.

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