CHAPTER-III

Feminism in the Novels of Shobha De
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SHOBHA DE

Shobha De, a super model, celebrity, journalist, the best selling author and one of the famous feminist writers of today has shattered patriarchal hegemony in her novels spread in Indian society fed on well-known injunctions of the Manusmriti. Women are treated as subaltern and mere ‘man’s shadow- self’. They are considered the otherness of man and not one with men or individuals. However, the role of women in society has been changing with each decade of a century, always with a good deal of social conflict and ideological struggle. These have left a great influence on sexual mores and social codes of the prevalent society which in turn is well embodied by Shobha De in her characters. She voices against the malicious culture and strongly detects the marginalization of women. Shobha De has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of women are sex-oriented and sex-centered in the male dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains of husband and society. They are reactionary and rebel, ‘a new woman’ and ‘a liberated human being’. She does not believe in describing her women characters as love – slaves, bitches or mere helpmates at home. In her novels she presumably mirrors her own feminist and sexiest mind set. A broader evaluation of her works reveals her protest against the good old image of woman as ‘an appendage’ or ‘an auxiliary’. Shobha de strives to undo this titled and distorted image of woman, who cries for freedom and equality which still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. From this perspective, the women in her works are more powerful than men. Women are essentially represented sexually liberated and free thinking and have become known as the ‘New Women’ in later twentieth - century fiction. But even more remarkable is the strength of her
characters in the very culture that has judged her. The problem of search for identity is very much related to the problem of existence. It has been a popular theme with the women writers of Indian fiction in English. They have tried to depict this theme in their works in one way or the other. On the one hand we have early novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal dealing with the theme of crises of identity, while on the other, we have novelists like Manju Kapoor, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and Namita Gokhale presenting the bold female characters that assert their identity through protest and defiance and deconstruct femininity.

Shobha De has tried her best to expose the moral breakdown of modern society in which a hapless and forsaken woman longs for fulfillment and wants to fly in the sky unfettered. So her females deconstruct femininity and go through the upheavals of life on physical and emotional levels to finally achieve some measure of freedom from social bondage. Her various books, novels, non-fictional works (*Surviving Men, Speed-post and Spouse*), her autobiography (*Selective Memory*), all highlight, her attempts to find ways by which women can survive and cope in a world that’s cruel to them. Her novels deal with men and women belonging to the upper class or middle class- their obsessions, disappointments and insecurities. She wants equal opportunities for women. In the Indian set up a woman is expected to enact the role of an obedient daughter, a dutiful and a devoted wife and finally a sacrificing mother. At no time during her life, she is treated as a person; she is always considered to be an appendage to some men. But Shobha De in her major novels like *Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sisters, Second Thoughts*, shows the principle of the social mobility working behind the class or cultural changes in women who try to exert for their place in the society they live in. She clarifies however that her brand of feminism
is not about women getting up and fighting for their rights, but is more sly and subversive. Her women move out of their middle class origins and join the upper class. They are women of substance, self-substance, self-sufficient and having free spirit. In De’s self-help book for Indian women, *Surviving Men: The Smart Woman’s Guide to Staying on Top*, she gives similar advice and suggests that in order to “train a man to any level of competence, women should use: a). food, b). sex, c). food & sex” (163).

In 1927, an article entitled *Feminist - New Style* in Harper’s Magazine declared the newly-evolved modern woman a composite figure, a boyish girl who combines the flapper’s physical freedom, sexuality and stamina with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, a woman who can happily combine pleasure, career and marriage. “To the advanced 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” (Schneider 148). Shobha De shapes her women in the above frame.

*Socialite Evenings*, the maiden novel of Shobha De is about the journey of the prominent Bombay socialite Karuna, from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. This novel was published in 1989. This novel gives us the picture of the marginalization of the Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Kate in Jane Wagner’s – *The Search for Signs* says:

I am sick of being the victim

of trends, I reflect

but don’t even understand (53)

Through these lines it is clear that Kate becomes painfully aware of her position in the system whose trends incarcerate her. But Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*
is a different woman. She is all agog to break-out of such thralldom which “compels her to assume the status of the other” (Beauvoir 85). Throughout the novel Karuna figures as a woman who asserts her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. She figures as a woman, not victim. Karuna has a quest to find about herself which springs from her discontent with her own life which doesn’t come upto her expectations.

In this novel, one can easily witness that Karuna’s life is divided into three phases: - The quest to know about herself, which started towards the end of the first phase, is stopped abruptly with her marriage. It is under control in the second phase and springs up in the third phase (life after the separation from husband) more powerfully image of her disgustingly self-assured and self-sufficient.

Karuna, the heroine of the novel was born in a middle class family at ‘Satara’ village situated in Maharashtra. Her birth was not cause of the happiness of her parents because after getting two daughters, Swati and Alka they were desiring for a son as it is common in our India, we hope for a son. After sometimes Karuna with her family shifted to Bombay. There she met Anjali, a super model and wife of a wealthy playboy Abe. She offered modelling to Karuna. Karuna discussed this offer with her mother but she strictly denied this career to Karuna by saying “Father will be very upset if he hears about this woman. Have you taken his permission before agreeing to model for her?”(7)

The fear of Karuna’s mother is very obvious because in a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the father who chooses the profession of their children. When the children do something appreciable the credit goes to the father but when they do something mischievous, only the mothers are responsible. Mothers play a very significant role in a child’s life but it stops when a child grows up and wants to take
up a decision related to his profession. In short, important decisions are taken by others not by the mothers.

Karuna from her school life wanted to do something different. She was stylish and attractive. She too like Anjali desired to be a wealthy person in her life: “How desperately I wanted to be in that charmed circle of rich girls who had everything” (12).

Karuna without getting the permission of her parents performed in many ad-films and stepped towards her new life with the help of Anjali. But no one easily understood that her father wanted to control all his daughters in the same way. He never talked to them directly and tried to know about their likes and dislikes. In the male oriented society fathers crush girls’ sense of individuality in order to impose their male authority on them. Their earlier lives exploited by their fathers or father figures, make them react irrationally and violently. But when their sense of survival takes a responsible turn, they begin to revise their opinion about this relationship. After sometimes Karuna’s parents accepted her profession. Further her stay in the U.S. gave her a feeling of superiority and made her assertive. Karuna and Anjali both were suffocated in their early life due to their father’s dominating nature. Anjali explained: “Basically, I wanted to get out of the closed, boring, middle class environment of my family. I wasn’t interested in studies. I wanted to be on my own, independent. Too see the world, meet people, buy lovely clothes and perfumes” (6).

In this male dominated society no one cares about the dreams of a female whether it is a father or husband. Women have to suppress their ambitions inside them. In her married life too Karuna was not happy. Her marriage is a failure since it is loveless and joyless. There is no understanding between the husband and wife. She feels that she has married “the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time”
Her husband is just the average Indian husband, “Unexcited, uninspiring, untutored”(94). He was not made for introspection. The average Indian woman’s conjugal life is to her “an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left” (95) and “marriage” is like a skin allergy, and irritant. Karuna’s husband is unable to look deep into the biological need of Karuna’s female self. There was no meaningful conversation between the husband and wife. She detested the stand-offish and callous attitude of the husbands who often kept themselves busy in drab, monotonous activities like reading the business pages of *The Times of India*. But despite these laxities, a husband was above all, a sheltering tree, a rock to the wife. They were not wholly bad or evil and the wife as a woman was only a peripheral being. Karuna said:

> We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was ‘You don’t really count, except in the context of my priorities’. It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our head and four square meals a day. (101)

Karuna toed the track of an ideal housewife conforming to the demands of tradition. She was a conservative Hindu housewife, wrapped in yards and yards of sari. She dutifully obeyed her husband’s order and fulfilled his demands. The house was neat and tidy and everything was kept in order. Whenever Karuna expressed her resentment he asked: “Do you have better alternatives, wifey” (125). The role of a wife restricts a woman’s self development. Karuna tried harder to save her marriage:

> The more my marriage deadened the harder I tried to convince myself that I was happy enough as I was. I began to see myself as a drifter, letting life happen to me. If the husband was unhappy I’d try not to argue, only do things the way he wanted. (143)
Anjali threw off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rose to the social status of the upper classes. She enacted a marriage of choice with a Muslim, Abe. But she was not happy in her married life because Abe was “an experienced rake with a wild reputation” (6). De reflects what Betty Friedan says, on fateful life of housewives:

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for women of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity.

(293)

In bad conditions Karuna wanted to help Anjali with her daughter Mimi (Mumtaz). About her condition Karuna said to her that, “Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single” (94). Karuna’s views about marriage had changed now. According to her marriage is not everything. “Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It’s just something to get used to” (98-99).

Anjali did not want to remain single in her life. She was very much interested in second marriage and tried to get attached emotionally with other men but she made a fool of herself. All the men loved her physically and tried to fulfil their physical desires with Anjali. It proves that men do not have any emotional attachment with women; they only try to play with women’s emotions. At last she succeeded in her marriage with Kumar, who was rich but he was homosexual. Eventually Anjali took to inhabiting a traditional woman- space: religion. Anjali informed Karuna that she pared her nails because her husband did not like her long nails. Thus, she had conformed to the husband’s wishes.
Karuna too discarded the dogmatic rules of a hackneyed and worn-out tradition for sustaining and cherishing her extra-marital relationship with Krish. Even she did not hesitate to restrain her husband from a week long sexual orgy with Krish in Rome. A woman in Indian society marries not just the man but also his family and subsequently loses her identity in marriage, relinquishes her freedom and sets about pleasing everybody. But the new generation of women with their new-found release from matrimonial bondage adopts different perspectives, and revolt against the old order. De’s women are such liberated individuals in search of a niche in their lives through escapades and sexcapades. Karuna fails to get emotional support from her husband and tires to get it in Krish. Somehow, she realizes that it is not the support of males but she herself, is also capable of surviving in this patriarchal world.

In India the institution of marriage has very traditional setup which subjugates and torture women. Through suppression and dominance it makes division between husband and wife rather than bringing true union of two hearts. It defines position of husband and wife in the family. Traditionally a husband commands his wife and subordinates her desire. Marriage leads woman to “aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (Dodiya 134). Husband demands complete selfless surrender to him. Thus she being a property of her husband loses her personality, qualities and dreams. She is not given any “room of her own”.

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees… she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and
not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential. He is
the subject, he is the absolute, and she is the other. (Beauvoir 8)

Though a wife is considered as life partner, she is always ignored and
neglected by her husband in reality. Thus, like a caged bird, she has to live in a
suffocating atmosphere and “her wounded psyche is caged by the male dominant
culture” (Kumar 153) without any option. In no circumstance she will be allowed to
have extra marital affair which is considered as social taboo and immoral though
husband had full right to it.

Shobha De’s character - Karuna is not a traditional housewife but a
challenging character not to yield to male egoistic behaviour. In fact, “De reshapes
her women characters as aggressive blasters of the male ego and male hierarchy”
(Ningthoujam 15). When her husband comes to know the affair of Karuna with Krish
he says: “I’ve thought over the whole thing carefully. I would’ve thrown you right
now- but I am prepared to give you one more chance. I’m not a mean man” (292).

This act of forgiveness, on the part of her husband is an act of his male ego,
his assertion of superiority. What right has he to say that ‘I am not a mean man’ when
he himself has denied his wife the conjugal bliss of a marital life by often keeping
himself at a distance from her? In what way is he fair, which he in the course of his
tirade admits to be? He is unable to look deep into the biological need of his wife’s
female self. If Karuna had any affair with Krish, it was only a means to fulfill her
psychological and emotional need. In Snapshot Rashmi is convinced from her own
experience: - “Men lead pretty, self obsessed lives” she asks: - “But was any man
[worth a woman’s love]” (224). In G. B. Shaw’s Arms and the Man” Sergius also
says: “How unworthy even the best is of a girl’s pure passion!” (124). Now frailty’s
name is no longer a woman. Emilia says in *Othello* “It is their husband’s faults if wives do fall, say that they slack their duties”. (Shakespeare 334).

Such an involvement on the part of Karuna may also be a strategic escape from the claustrophobia and cloistered milieu of her marital life where they lived as two separate islands: “It wasn’t that I never tried, but there was no question that my husband and I inhabited different planets”(99).

The modern New Woman Karuna, independent in all respects, is a respectable, conservative Hindu housewife, wrapped in yards and yards of sari. The role of a wife restricts a woman’s self-development. Rosemarie Tong maintains: “Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing”(200).

Shobha De views woman not only as submissive creature but also as the embodiment of power. In Karuna this power (Shakti) syndrome assumes a positive figure but in Winnie it is a negative force, the destructive image, the image of Kali. As Karuna’s husband says about Winnie: “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”(422).

The psychology proved that men are egoistic because they do not like those women who are self dependent and capable to take their own decisions. Karuna says:- Men just feel terribly threatened by self sufficient women. They prefer girls like me-dependent dolls” (101). Karuna learns from Ritu, another freedom loving and bold character in the novel that “Men, like dogs, could be conditioned through rewards and punishment” (131). Ritu is also the part of male domination. She is a practical lady. Ritu explains this egoistic nature of man by saying: “Every wife who likes good
things knows how to get them. ... I let him think he is superior”(130). Ritu is also Shobha De’s modern woman, who is fully aware about her needs. She says: “I look after his mother, his home, and his needs. Why shouldn’t I expect something in return? If I didn’t fulfil him in bed he’d look elsewhere. May be go to a prostitute” (130).

It means Ritu is bold and intelligent who knows very well how to deal with men. But a woman can never go far away from the emotions which are in her heart. So in the same manner Ritu was little involved with Karan but Karan helped her to take her up. S.S.Kanade says: “De is quite sympathetic towards women characters. Hence, woman is the central consciousness of her novel”(136). The females in Shobha De’s novels are very revolutionary. They always try to be on the top of the society and in the family but in most of the novels they remain alone with their unfulfilled dreams. They pass their remaining life in search of their Astitva. Then how can we say that in modern world women are free from all the bondages.

Karuna detests her husband’s duplicity and flattering nature. He who had earlier rebuked and reproached her for having an illegal child is now satisfying her female ego by sly and base flattery, by saying that it was their legitimate child. But this is too late for Karuna, for she has already undergone the protracted pangs of an abortion. Hence, her demolition of the male ego: “You are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie. I hope she’s got a wax doll of yours. I will send her some extra pins to stick into it.”(423)

Shobha De knows very well the psychology of men. So the purpose of her first novel is to show the conditions of women, their revolution and the modern attitude of women in present time. Karuna’s marriage with the emotionless wealthy man, merely for money and status is finally broken. After three years of romance, she realizes the
bitter truth of male mentality of Krish who refuses to wed her. She realizes the truth that her affair with Krish for a hope of colourful life for full of passion and freedom is nothing else but ‘a mere sex game’. She is already a divorcee. Thus she is liberated from both her husband and lover and becomes independent. Now Karuna comes out as a new woman. She firmly says:

I feel all closed up and insulated. I need little time. I am discovering myself. I enjoyed this little patch of independence. I am reconnecting with my parents – they need me. I am enjoying their presence. Don’t rush me please. (408-09)

In fact, she is so determined to resort her freedom that she doesn’t even pay heed to the warning of her mother regarding problems of women leading a single life in patriarchal society. Her mother alerts her:

A woman cannot live alone. It is not safe. We are here today, but who knows about tomorrow? A woman needs a man’s protection. Society can be very cruel. ...a woman’s real place is in her husband’s house-not in her parents’. (440-41)

Now Karuna is not interested in remarriage. About this Karuna questions her mother:

But, mother why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much money as any man; I have a roof over my head. I don’t really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself; I am not answerable to anyone. … I can’t make any “sacrifices” not now. (441-42)

Karuna is sensible enough and well aware of difficulties of running a single life in this society. Yet, her present happiness and bitter marital experience makes her so firm that she is not more interested to be trapped in another marriage with anyone.
She doesn’t find any similarity between her concept of marriage and the social view of marriage. She has her own views of marriage. To her marriage means a life “full of laughter and conversation. One in which the two of us were perfectly in tune. Speaking the same language, thinking the same thought, enjoying the same thing”(99). But, it is a dream in this society which can never come true.

When her marital views are shattered with her divorce from her husband and after disillusionment from Krish, she loses her faith in the institution of marriage. That is why she towards the end of the novel firmly says to Ranbir, a reporter in Washington Times, “Single is good for me”(489). She easily says “no” to the marriage proposal offered to her by Girish, the famous art film maker, in spite of their common interests she expresses her feeling: “I don’t feel like complicating my life getting into second marriage. I like and respect Girish. We share a lot of common interests ... I can’t make any sacrifice – now” (442).

Thus, through her denial of another marriage, Karuna reveals her protest against the traditional social system and emerges as a “rebellious” modern Indian girl who is conscious about her freedom and right. She is no more weak and docile but dynamic and determined woman. She is now totally changed and experienced woman. Taking up a non-conformist stance, she adopts a radical feminist point of view all agog to “destroy the sex/gender system- the real source of women’s oppression and to create a new society in which men and women are equals at every level of existence”( Millett 62).

Shobha De deconstructs the idea of feminism in portraying her women characters with non-traditional image. These modern women manipulate every opportunity to realize their dreams. For them “marriage is considered a game for security and convenience” (Ningthoujam 55). To fulfil her desire, Karuna rejects her
affectionate fiancé because of his poor background and marries a rich person whom she never loves from her heart. She was not serious about her future marital bliss. Rather she was more serious about her material and outward happiness. She conscientiously marries her husband for money to become a socialite without thinking for a moment of her conjugal happiness. As in another novel Second Thoughts of Shobha De we have Maya who is more interested in Bombay than in Ranjan. She marries Ranjan without thinking for a moment of her conjugal happiness.

At the end of the journey of her life she realizes that her marriage with her boring and uninspiring husband was a great blunder of her life. Then she decides to write her memoirs. Karuna’s act of writing her life, to write and represent it on her own terms, emphasizing and narrating her experiences, is the inauguration of her individual rebellion against patriarchy.

In conclusion it can be said that Shobha De in Socialite Evenings has presented her protagonist, Karuna as self confident and potential woman, who strives to get total freedom from man and to deconstruct the social concept of women. She shows her faith in the power of women and in this way deconstruct the old idea of feminism. Karuna represents her new women who are full of confidence and look forward hopefully for a satisfied free life. She represents the middle class urban married women who are conscious of their legal, social and conjugal rights.

Similarly, Shobha De’s second novel Starry Nights (1991), is a story of Aasha Rani, a fifteen years old girl who comes to Bombay from Madras with her amma to become a film star. It is also the story of Malini and Rita. Malini is a traditional wife existing on one extreme of femininity who wants to possess her husband forever. Rita is the wife of Kailash; a rich film maker, who is equally faithful to Rita. Through these women characters Shobha De makes an effort to show the double standard of
our society. In this novel, De moves far away from depicting characters in the tradition of Indian womanhood.

Whole novel shows the life of Aasha Rani which is full of struggle. She is the illegitimate child of a film producer, the owner of the biggest and the most successful studio of Madras. Though he is having a family of his own, a wife and three sons, he whisks Aasha Rani’s mother away and keeps her in a separate bungalow. Appa, her father, loses interest in her amma after a few years and his wife also humiliates her. She is left with no money and is forced to sell her jewellery and clothes. It is then that her mother starts selling herself for the sake of her children. So, from her childhood she suffers the agony of unsuccessful relationship of her parents. The girls with their unaffectionate, un-understanding mother find themselves deprived of emotional security in childhood. In order to survive, her mother pushes her into the under-world of blue films. “Amma please don’t, I am so scared. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers?” (89-90). Amma scolds her: “Don’t be stupid. These films will not be shown in the theatres. Nobody will know you have done them. There’s lot of money involved. I have committed on your behalf”(89). She persuades her by saying: “Think of it like going to the doctor’s. Don’t you allow him examine your body? These people are the same. They see bodies all the time. It does not make any difference”(90). Finally, her amma makes her submit to her wishes as she wants to buy a pressure cooker and pay the fees of her younger sister Sudha. For her own survival her mother crosses all the limits of being humane to her daughters. It seems that long back she has ceased to be a mother.

That is Aasha Rani’s first lesson in exploitation in the unfriendly world and the way to deal with this world is shown to her by her own scheming mother who for the sake of money, forces her into the orgy of blue films. There is no ending then; she
reaches the stardom only after being sexually exploited by producers, distributors, heroes, and other film people. Carrying the heavy burden of neglected childhood, she carves for toys, as she once tells Kishenbhai, the producer of her first film: “You don’t know about my childhood. ...I never had anything to play with – no toys, nothing” (6). Due to the lack of emotional support Aasha grows with a disgusted feeling of hatred for men. Her sense of vengeance is also due to her own exploitation by the male world: “...Aasha Rani’s thinly disguised hatred for men. Perhaps it had something to do with appa and the way he’d mistreated her mother, or may be she felt soiled, used, exploited by them” (13). This hidden hatred compels her to use men as they use her. She tells Kishenbhai: “All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do with me. I will screw you all. Beat you at your own game!” (13).

In her struggle for survival, Aasha Rani comes in contact with Seth Amirchand, a member of the Legislative Assembly who keeps his “God father image” and calls himself a protector of the weak. Aasha Rani knows that pleasing Sethji means her successful film career for nobody in film world would survive without the blessing and patronage of a rich politician with shady dealings. She does not accept the money he offers to her for her services. She has by now mastered the art and is playing cunning games with Sethji to please him. She tells Sethji’s man: “Please tell Sethji, I consider it’s my duty to please him. It gives me pleasure to see him happy.” (105). With Sethji’s help she becomes a superstar and her career soars to the top.

At this stage, she falls in love with Akshay Arora who being married to Malini, uses her to retain his stardom. He realizes that “this was the only one surefire way for him to hold on to his niche at the top and it involved Aasha Rani” (66). But Akshay’s wife Malini hates Aasha for disturbing their married life with the help of her
friend Rita, she rebukes Aasha Rani. Malini screamed, “SEX! That is all you have SEX! That is what women like you use. Cheap bitches, part your legs and let any man in. SEX, SEX, dirty filthy sex, Perverts! You must be a pervert”(83). Aasha, confident of her love, makes her realize that she herself is responsible to break the bond between her and Akshay for she does not greet him properly when he comes back home and does not give proper celebration in the bed. Malini thinks “Men are all the same animals and we women such fools” (84). Be it Malini or Rita, each partner in marriage is denied full individuality. Rita says:

Most women hate their husbands – it’s a fact. They hate marriage. That’s also a fact. But what else they can do? What is the choice? The only way to make a marriage work is through sex – and most women hate that too. But the day a man feels that his woman has lost interest in sex, and therefore in him, the relationship is finished and he starts looking elsewhere. Aasha Rani and her kind are always waiting. (84-85)

What Rita tells about the plight of married woman in India is also a matter of deep concern for the feminists of today: “we demand communication, attention, pampering. Arrey baba, forget it. We should be happy if they don’t beat us, burn us, torture us, insult us, and discard us. That is all”(200). Praful Bidwai, a columnist of repute, writes, “Marriage involves a terrible seductionism. It can encompass and envelop the complexity of most relationships only by simplifying them grotesquely” (22).

Akshay’s wife Malini was well educated and a ghazal singer but she quit her career only to make Akshay happy: “My husband means more to me than a career. I
believe a wife’s place is in the home, not in recording studio. Akshay is an old fashioned man. I will never displease him”(67).

Shobha De wants to show the inequality between man and woman in our society. She says that when man marries he doesn’t have to make sacrifices but a woman sacrifices in many ways. She has to abandon her career. Akshay wants full faithfulness of his wife, while he is not faithful towards her.

Aasha Rani has to suffer a lot due to her relationship with Akshay. Things become so bad that when she goes uninvited to the mahurat of Akshay’s film, she is not only humiliated but also beaten by Akshay. Still she cannot turn away from him. The feeling of victory of love makes her so crazy that she decides to leave her career to become his wife, the mother of his children. For Akshay’s love, Aasha for the first time rebels against the overpowering mother when she calls her for an explanation, Aasha bursts out:

Money, money, money. That’s all you think of well, I am fed up of being your money machine. I have done enough for everybody- you, Sudha and other – now, I want to live for myself and enjoy my life.

(183-84)

Akshay, a typical representative of the society, has no courage to take a bold step. He keeps enjoying both worlds. In order to get rid of Aasha, Akshay exposes her past and gives all the information about her blue film days to the *Showbiz* magazine. At this point, Sethji comes to help her and sends her to Dubai for change. After coming back from Dubai, she reaches Madras and finds her father very sick; but she neither feels any emotions for him nor goes to see him; “But why should I go to see him? I haven’t seen him in years. Since I was a child, he hasn’t bothered about any of us either. Now that he is dying, why does he care whether we see him or not?
De’s women are not emotional fools. They do not take care of a person who does not take care of them. Aasha is also one of them.

Aasha’s desire for Akshay puts her in humiliating situations. Being frustrated and disappointed in her desire for fulfillment in love, she finds herself indulging in a lesbian relationship with Linda, a film magazine journalist. She says to Aasha, “Let me do to you what no man could have done. . . . This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our bodies” (137). Here surrendering of ego is important, the implication being it is easier to surrender before one’s own sex than to the male who always rules, exploits and dominates the female. And herein comes another facet of lesbian behaviour, independence from the male which is an important principle of feminism or Women’s liberation movement. One of the subjects in the Hite survey says “Sex with a man is often the beginning of a political education. Sex with a woman means independence from man” (qtd. in Pandeya 206). In spite of such physical intimacy, Linda does not hesitate to use her pen against Aasha Rani. She is guided by selfishness, professional gain and other considerations rather than human relationship.

Abhijit’s interest in her in spite of his beautiful fiancée Nikita whom he marries later on fills Aasha Rani with further remorse. She tells Abhijit, “you are not making love to me! You are screwing my own image my screen image. Get out of here, Abhijit. Go back to your wife and make a man of yourself” (167).

Aasha goes to Wellington where she meets Jamie (Jay) Phillips and accepts his proposal to marry him. Far from the world of cinema she leads a family life with a farmer. Her life is filled with love and satisfaction. With the birth of her daughter, Sasha, she finds her life complete and tries to forget her past. On Jay’s strong persuasion that she needs to go back to India Aasha Rani returns to her home country.
Her arrival in Bombay brings back all the old memories. Her mother makes a strong suggestion that she should need to stay in India in case she wants to resume her acting in films. Jay now decides to return to New Zealand alongwith Sasha. At the same time, he makes her realize that she has to find her own identity now: “You were hiding in New Zealand. Now your exile is over. You are no longer afraid of yourself. This is where you belong” (290). Her father, too, wishes her to reopen his studio and revive his banner.

Sudha enters into the film world with Aasha’s exile and soon replaces her. She behaves like a mature businesswoman right from the beginning. Amma has lost her dictator’s image and totally depends upon the mercy of Sudha who rather behaves like her mother. She is portrayed as scheming and smart and knows how to deal with the world. She does not allow her mother to use her as she had used her elder sister. Amma is given a fixed allowance by her. She also stays in her separate bungalow away from her mother. She is a modern woman, since she is not bothered about the morals relating to marriage and stays with Amar, her co-star. Amma remarks: “They simply stay together. Shamelessly”(254). After becoming a superstar, Sudha abandons her parents as she tells Aasha: “Don’t talk to me about that man or amma, I hate them both” (285). She learns rapidly how to survive in the film world and as a superstar, she plays her part quite successfully as she says in her interviews: “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”(286-87). Sudha, who has now developed a hostile attitude towards her elder sister, Aasha, invites her to her place and tells lie about Jay’s affair with her. She feels betrayed. Moreover, when she calls Jay, she comes to know from Sasha about his affair with her nanny. She feels
shattered; “whichever way one looked at it, there was always a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman” (268).

Aasha Rani feels afraid of failure both in her married life and in her career as a movie star. She even asks her father why men behave that way and why he has behaved so badly with her mother. It is then that he advises her to have control over financial matters:

Men are cruel, very cruel. There is no justice in this world. And no equality between men and women. Don’t believe that a marriage alters that balance. Sometimes it only makes it worse. Power lies with the purse-remember that. Whoever controls that, controls the relationship.

(331)

Aasha Rani goes back to Wellington, where she comes to know that her marriage is over. An incomplete childhood with a single parent, poverty, starvation, her mother’s cruelty in making her a film star, the devilish attitude of the people of the stardom to bruise and batter her femininity, the jealousy and unkindness of her sister Sudha, the collapse of her marital life and separation from her own child – she stoically endures a series of shocks one after another. But she emerges as a strong woman in the end fighting bravely against her guilty conscience and wounded psyche. During her period as a film star, she comes under so many difficulties, yet she never leaves the film world. She is bold and capable of surviving in degrading moral values of life. She suffers humiliation as far as her social, economic and cultural life is concerned but she also finds herself capable of struggling, compromising and realizing her existence. Even in the end of the novel Aasha dreams to rule over the film world through Sasha: “Oh yes, Sasha would be tomorrow’s Lover Girl” (401). Thus the novel ends on an optimistic note. In this novel, Shobha De discusses love
and sex frankly. Shobha De in her bold and transparent language portrays the intensity of grief of a tormented, discarded and anguished soul. She establishes her writing as a further extension of feminism and a protest against the established patriarchal order of society. This novel is not a treatise on sex, or a mere pornography but it depicts the modern woman’s search for identity in a male oriented society.

Sisters (1992), Shobha De’s third novel is characterized by similar themes of self-assertion and empathy for the city women. The present novel focuses on the corporate world, unlike her previous novel Starry Nights that deals with the film world and its glamour. It focuses as much on the seamy side of the business life as on the inner turmoil of the protagonist. It is the story of two beautiful, modern, bold and intelligent half sisters having an industrialist father, Seth Hiralal. Mallika Hiralal has to abandon her studies in U.S.A. and return to Bombay to attend the funeral of her parents who have died in an air-crash. Very soon, she is exposed to the duplicity of her father as she discovers that she has a half-sister Alisha Mehta born of a mistress four months after her. She feels betrayed. Now, when she thinks of her father: “Her father, always distant, now seemed a total stranger. A stranger who’s led a sneaky double life” (20). In her hour of loneliness, Mikki tries to befriend Alisha, the only relative she has now but is sharply snubbed. Mikki, after her parents’ death, feels lonely. The existence of Alisha gives her a sense of solace. Further, her faith in human values prompts her to establish relationship with Alisha.

Now Mikki decides to take charge of her father’s industries which are verging on collapse. It is too much burden for a girl like Mikki, whose twentieth birthday was just three months away. Ramanbhai her father’s confidant and employee says:

Mallika Hiralal, I’m privileged to inform you that starting tomorrow, you –yes you- are the head of Hiralal Industries! And now, hold your
head high and face the world. Let everybody here know that henceforth they will be dealing with you. (15).

Her desire to excel and prove herself capable of doing real business gives her the courage to address the meeting boldly:

She’d found some hitherto unknown strength as she held forth confidently and firmly, outlining her resolve to head her father’s empire and steer his companies towards the path of even greater success” (29).

Mikki trusts Raman Kaka. She has faith upon him because she thinks that he is an old employee of them and he has also played a good role for their success. Shanay alerts her by telling her that this old man is cheating you as there are major irregularities in several departments and Ramanbhai is responsible for all this. She also notices that Raman Kaka is hiding some things from her, and also perceives some kind of discouragement on his part when he remarks: “Trust me, I will guard your interests like a father. But you will make things difficult for yourself if you do things without consulting me” (49). Mikki, on the other hand is bold enough. She tells him very frankly: “My genes are the same as my father’s even if my gender is not. I’m determined not to let the companies go by default. I will learn whatever I have to and I will hire whoever I think fit” (49).

Anjanaben (Shanay’s mother) is a very clever minded lady. She wants Shanay to marry Mallika and gets hold over Hiralal’s empire. According to her, Mallika is a foolish girl with no business sense and Shanay should take advantage of her innocence. She again says to her husband; “The girl is like a small mouse with vultures all around just waiting to pounce on her” (44). After rejecting Shanay, Mikki gets engaged to Navin, who has been a good friend of Mikki.
Mikki is a practical woman when Amy asks her about this she remarks: “Love? Why should I love him? I am looking for a husband, marriage . . . not an affair”(100). Her only intention is that Navin, “may help me with Hiralal Industries” (101). However she feels disappointed when Navin does not propose to her directly rather sends the proposal through Anjanaben. Like a modern woman, she believes in making her decisions herself and materializing them too, and that’s what she tells Navin also: “... I am disappointed that a modern man like, you should need an intermediary to fix your deals” (103). To save the industries from going bankrupt, Mikki decides to borrow from her fiancé. But it takes her no time to realize that Navin is putty in his mother’s hands. She feels insulted there. She calls off her engagement with him as she cannot marry a man with no self-respect and identity. Now there is no one to whom she can move and should believe in. There are problems everywhere in business and in personal life.

Binny Malhotra takes advantage of the situation and lures away Mikki by giving costly presents and promising financial help. Amy, her mother’s friend, also suggests her:

The quickest way to shoot to the top is to tie up with Malhotra. And I am being very practical when I tell you this- what’s the worst thing that could happen in that alliance? A disastrous marriage can always be put behind you, darling. These days divorce is not what it used to be (135).

She, somehow, gets the point and agrees to marry him. But Shanay does not agree with her. He replies- “Oh Mikki, why did you have to make such a big sacrifice” (144). At this Mikki burst out and said “Sacrifice! How can you use such a word, Shanay. I’ll be proud to marry Binny and become Mrs. Malhotra”(144). She
also tells Raman Kaka, who is also against this marriage that: The decision is mine and I strongly believe it’s in everybody’s interests” (145). Despite being warned, Mikki marries Binny. In his company she feels a sense of security:

She felt liberated, uninhabited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon. If this was what her man wanted, if this was what made him happy, should give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her body, her mind and her soul. She was in love with him. And he was finally hers. (175)

It is this total submission, a characteristic of the traditional woman, which adds to the superiority of man and consequent exploitation of women. Binny shows his true colours after marriage. Mikki finds out that he is already having a family and he is a father of two children. But he never married with that mistress because she wasn’t classy enough for him. He uses Mikki and makes it very clear that “Mikki should accept Urmi in their life” (200). Binny’s blunt reply is a commentary of women’s position, which the novelist exposes. As a representative of the oppressive system Binny says:

In our family women are trained to obey their husbands...you will never I repeat, never, question me or complain. You have nothing to complain about – got that? Your life is perfect. You have everything-everything. Where I go, what I do, when and with whom, is my business.” (187)

The process of dehumanization of Mikki begins, when all her property is transferred to Binny. Besides, she is denied motherhood for she has to keep always fit for him. Mikki’s situation in the novel throws light on the harsh realities of the patriarchal society. It also hints at the growing awareness among the women who
begin to rise from the eternal slumber and call shots. Mikki’s continual protest with Binny results from her innate desire for freedom. Mikki does not like the inhuman subordination of the woman for her materialistic pleasures without freedom of the “self” mean nothing. In fact, Shobha De’s women long for personal freedom, and when they are denied this, they turn rebellious. They express their anger by resorting to what might be termed as unethical acts that is breaking the marriage oaths on indulging in extra-marital affairs and promiscuity. It is this theme of self assertion which is central to all the novels of Shobha De.

Her dream to enjoy, the fruit of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his house. Here Shobha De wants to show that this is the destiny of Indian women. Although Binny is already married yet he abuses Mikki on seeing her with Lucio, a friend from crash course in gourmet cooking, experimenting in the kitchen. He doesn’t give any attention to her words. He uses Mikki for his purpose while Mikki truly loves him. However, Mikki comes back to her parents’ place and decides to take Alisha’s help. Her life experiences give her an insight into her being as a woman and an individual.

On the other hand when Alisha admits her mother to the hospital she comes into contact with Dr. Kurien and feels attracted towards him. She falls in love with him and makes sexual relationship with him. But when she comes to know that he has a family and he loves his wife and children very much, she feels frustrated. She imitates her sister and finds a sense of satisfaction when Mikki is in trouble; she traps Navin “because Mikki had had him” (195). She misses no opportunity to insult her sister. Mikki asks Alisha: why are you so angry with me? What have I ever done to you? We are sisters nothing can change that, don’t you see? (42) Alisha’s hatred for
Mikki is based on her sense of being neglected by her father. When Leelaben, Alisha’s mother tries to stop her she is tempted to strike her. She cries:

   Stop it, Mummy, stop it! I can’t bear your stupid attitude. What’s the point in crying? Will it get us out of this lousy place? No, why waste your tears like this? I’m sick of you. Sick of our life. You sit there boozing, feeling sorry for yourself. But what about me? You may feel your life is over… but mine is just beginning. (60)

Shobha De wants to show the feelings of an illegitimate daughter. Although she is not responsible for her being born illegitimately but she has to face the bitterness of the society. She is a victim of her own illusions. In fact, she needs her sister more than Mikki does.

   Although both the sisters attempt to find fulfillment in their life, both the sisters are different from each other. Mikki’s encounter with different men helps her grow into an independent minded woman, while Alisha, failing to get any hint from her experience, becomes an introvert. Alisha tries to commit suicide when she comes to know that Navin is going back to Mikki and Dr. Kurien whom she loved was already married and having children. But she is luckily survived by the treatment of Dr. Kurien and Mikki, who gives blood for her. Mikki realizes it all her fault as she should never have allowed Navin back into her life. But he caught her at the wrong time when she was feeling weak, low and frustrated. She takes charge of Alisha’s life. This incident brings them closer and they stay together. Now, Binny is dead in a road accident. At this, Mikki feels very sad. She again becomes the owner of her property as well as the property of her late husband. At last Raman Kaka is also exposed for his conspiracy in killing Seth Hiralal.
Shobha De wants to show that this world is no world for lonely women like Mikki and Alisha. They suffer throughout their life without any fault of their own. They are cheated by so many persons whom they call their own. Mikki was far too young to be saddled with so much tragedy, so much responsibility. Her handling of Hiralal Industries after her father’s death is remarkable and praiseworthy. It is very difficult work for a young fragile woman like Mikki to handle the business empire and become a business tycoon. She not only accepts the challenge but also succeeds. She does not take any advice of anybody in doing this, not even of Ramanbhai who was a close confidant of her father. Against the conventional attitude of males it is a tough task for a woman to be the boss in such a big business empire.

Sisters shows how women are victims of male-passions. Seth Hiralal, a married man, had raped his watchman’s wife who died in forced abortion. Alisha is his daughter from his keep Leelaben. Binny has a mistress and children but he marries Mikki and forces her to go for abortion. Dr. Kurien loves Alisha but cannot accept her as he is having his own family.

Shobha De has shown the real conditions of these two women Mallika and Alisha who have struggled in their life without any crime. It means although destiny effects on the life of everyone may be they are men or women but it is more horrible for women than men because they are emotional and they have hearts full of mercy. In a patriarchal male-dominated society it is usually the man who exercises all power and it is under his guidance and directions that a woman is expected to act and follow. De’s women follow a completely opposite life-style. They show sufficient will power to challenge, defy and retaliate whenever they get a feeling of being subdued by men.

Mikki suffers terribly at every moment of her life. She lost her parents when she was only twenty years old and now before her twenty third birthday she is a
widow. But she faces every situation bravely and strongly. In spite of Binny’s cruelty she obeys him and loves him. When Binny’s secretary informs her that Mr. Malhotra is dead with Urmi and children and he also asks if she wants to absent herself at funeral Mikki replies: “Absent myself? What nonsense! He was my husband. As his widow, I would like to oversee all arrangements for the funeral” (275).

Both the women finally realize that there is no future for them in playing the weak female and always looking for man’s support. They have experienced enough cheating in their youth as to have learnt the futility of seeking friendship with men. They decide to meet every challenge with their joint effort. These are women who despite the hurdles in their way resolve to be independent and they achieve their purpose sooner or later. This image of the new woman, surmounting all obstacles in her way keeps emerging in De’s novels. Both the sisters go through the ordeal of self – assertion and they realize their freedom – a freedom to live a life of their choice.

Strange obsession (1992) is a masterpiece by Shobha De. The story of the novel has been chosen by the reputed school of Oriental and African studies of London as course material. It is a rebellious novel highlighting lesbian relationship.

Society, with its culture and taboos, has always put restrictions on woman’s freedom, ways and sexuality. Objection on her sexual desire is the code, she is taught from her childhood. Her sexuality provides her a meaning recognition only by giving delight and satisfaction to the males. She is made to fulfil his needs and longings. She is never permitted to find other ways for sexual fulfillment. The society with its present cultural system criticizes a woman if she goes beyond the principles of passivity and docility, and suspects her virtue if she denies. There may be so many reasons behind a woman loving a woman. As Simone-de-Beauvoir describes: “Disappointed in man, she may seek in woman a lover to replace the male who has
betrayed her” (438). She may even turn into a lesbian due to there impose codes of conduct and behavioural pattern. She rather wants to conform to here own desires and want to maintain her own independent identity.

On the other hand women have to be of a particular shape, size, age and appearance in order to be desired. Besides her behaviour patterns - temptation, passivity, are must for the stereotypically satisfying sexual act. These already formed images of sexuality exclude a large group of women since they do not own the required standard of appealing. It results in self-hatred and dislike for their own bodies. And therefore, these physical failings and behavioural weaknesses of women may lead to their liking each other. Simone De- Beauvoir explains:

When alone she does not succeed in really creating her double, if she caresses her own bosom, she still does not know how her breasts seem to a strange hand, nor how they are felt to react under a strange hand; a man can reveal to her the existence of her flesh for herself-that is to say, as she herself perceives it, but not what it is to others. It is only when her fingers trace the body of a woman whose fingers in turn trace her body that the miracle of the mirror is accomplished... Says Colette in Ces Plaisirs: ‘The close resemblance gives certitude of pleasure. The lover takes delight in being sure of caressing a body the secrets of which she knows, and whose preferences her own body indicates to her.’ (436).

Loving another woman not only proves and satisfies one’s own sexuality, but also that of the other woman, by the very act of loving. This means that she has to learn to like not only her own vagina, but someone else’s too. Thus, one of the prime attainments of the women’s movement has been its acknowledgement and acceptance
of sexual relationship between women. The phrase most commonly used by feminists to express describe this process is ‘coming out’, which means disclosing prior concealed and unknown identities, our real or true selves. Time and again, men insult a woman when they do not succeed in belittling her intellectual capabilities. Historically, women have been considered as commodity. Though some laws have changed theoretically little else has altered. The behaviours essentially required in the act of chasing and getting hold of a man creates a competition among women leading to surpass and overcome one another. The responsibility is placed completely on the woman with little thought given to the doubted infidelity of the man. A lesbian denies taking part in the game of competition for man, since she discards compulsory heterosexuality. She confronts her own sexuality and challenges the norms imposed and expected from her by culture or society. The society forces her to play the roles assigned to her. The very aspect of her existence does this whether willingly or unwillingly.

Shobha De in her revolutionary novel discusses the obsession of a lesbian called Minx or it seems to be a psychological documentation of sexual obsession of mysterious woman Meenakshi, who is also known as Minx. Her father was in a powerful position in police—an Inspector General. Her mother’s sickness and later institutionalization and her loneliness makes her psychologically sick. As she is thoroughly deprived of womanliness, she behaves like a male. The story unfolds when Amrita, an aspiring model, comes to Bombay from Delhi and meets Minx, a modern high flown lady, free from all taboos and values. Amrita is a beautiful, innocent and modern woman. She is independent and confident, “...a very responsible young lady” (1). She is always positive in her attitude because her family supports her. Very soon Amrita’s good looks bring her plenty of modelling assignments and take her to the top
as ‘Super Model’ of the Nineties’. In Bombay, when she first encounters with Minx: “Meenakshi stared into the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen and forgot what she wanted to say”(8). Minx has fallen in love with Amrita. But Amrita is quite unaware of her polluted thoughts and plans. Being a daughter of I. G. she is always conscious of exploiting the power and position of her father. Minx’s strange behaviour is beyond her understanding. Like her boyfriend she sometimes sends gifts and flowers to Amrita, with a small message written on it, ‘To your eyes’. Minx becomes overprotective towards Amrita and sometimes waits for her arrival at her door. On seeing that Amrita asks her why she comes to her room. Minx answers:

Why I came to your room. I wanted to see how you lived. Where you lived. What your bed looked like. The basin in which you brushed your teeth. The loo in which you peed. The shower under which you showered. Everything. ... I am not going to hurt or harm you. I only want to be your friend. That’s all. Allow me to do that and there won’t be any trouble. Or any surprises, promise. (32)

Minx is so crazy for Amrita that she steals her bra and panties. Amrita asks her coldly, you also steal some of my things. Minx replies her without any hesitation, of course I do. She reaches into her trouser pocket and whips out a slim package. She gives it to Amrita and says wear them and think of me. At this Amrita bursts out: “I don’t want to be your friend. Why can’t you accept that? (32)

Karan, the photographer in the ad-agency tells her about Minx and her strange adoration for beautiful models. Amrita becomes frightened and asks about her abnormal behaviour. Minx tells her:

Abnormal? What are you talking about? You think I am a bloody lesbian, don’t you? Well, guess what? You are wrong. And so are all
of them, who’ve been telling you that. I am not a dyke. I am not kinky and I am certainly not crazy. Don’t ask me to explain it to you – but I am in love with you. I love you. I adore you. It is not sexual. I don’t wish to go to bed with you. All I want is to be around you. That’s all.

(32-33)

Minx becomes over protective towards Amrita, almost takes charge of her life. Out of jealousy Minx segregates her from other models and even young men who are attracted towards her. “You don’t get it, do you? I love you. I have to protect you” (51). Her possessiveness for Amrita makes her violent and she goes to the extent of killing people. Out of her intense sexual feeling, Minx speaks: “Amrita, you have become a part of me. You live right here in my body. I can feel your presence inside me all the time”(33). Minx wants to please Amrita and makes many efforts to make her happy. She fixes air-conditioner in her room. But Amrita does not like her presence it makes her sick:

Why? Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because I belong to the same sex? Is that my only sin? You find it sickening to accept my love… but what about the animal Rover’s love? That’s Ok, you enjoy that. How come? And don’t tell me because they are men. And it’s normal. Bullshit! There is nothing abnormal about my feelings for you. It is your problem that you have hang-ups. And, like I told you, I don’t expect you to return my love, just accept it.(62)

In this moment Minx looks like a strange lover, ready to kill herself for Amrita. Minx will die if Amrita leaves her. It is the tragic condition of Amrita because now she neither can leave her nor accept her in her life. So she requests Minx:
Please, Minx. I can’t handle any more of this. Why can’t you understand that I have a life of my own … friends of my own … a family of my own. I have a right to all that. You cannot force me to accept you… or your so called love.(63)

Minx tries to gain her sympathy by telling her all false stories about her childhood. Minx undergoes surgery to remove her breasts just to please Amrita.

Two weeks ago I decided to chop them off. Believe me, baby, it was not easy. I was scared. I could tell no one, consult no one. But each time I was nervous and tense about the step I was going to take, I thought of you and the expression in your eyes. And then I knew I had to do it. And I knew you would like what I had done. Like me, also.

(135)

So deep is her desire and so strong her obsession that she is ready to do anything for her. Amrita feels pity and is drawn close to her. Minx enjoys sexual encounter with Amrita. But just after this experience, Amrita becomes conscious of her guilt. Again she asks Minx: “Will you be able to fill my womb with a child?”(160).

Amrita’s mother arranges her meeting with Rakesh, a businessman residing in America. Amrita fears that Minx could harm her someday. The few moments she spends with great confidence in his presence and knows that he would make a wonderful husband. Through the portrayal of Amrita, Shobha De advocates stability and security afforded to young girls in the age old institution of marriage. Minx plays her tricks to separate Rakesh and Amrita and sets the hut on fire. They sustain burn injuries. Minx is serious in hospital while Rakesh and Amrita recoup. Minx’s father tells Amrita about the disturbed state of Minx that:
My daughter is the severely disturbed child of a disturbed mother. She suffers from delusions, she tells lies, she makes up stories. The number of schools she has been expelled from have their own tales to tell.

(297)

The news of Meenakshi Iyenger’s death sets Amrita free from the fear she still carried inside her. Minx turns into a lesbian due to her hatred for her father. She gets no motherly love. All love and care she gets is from her father. During her adolescent years, she feels attracted to her father, the desire that could not be manifested due to social and moral codes. She is able to get what she wants but here she fails. She thus becomes a sexual competitor of her own mother. But the wish remains in her subconscious and she starts hating her father in particular and men in general and turns into a lesbian. Simone-De-Beauvoir distinguishes lesbians into two types: “The ‘masculine’ who wish to imitate male and the ‘feminine’, who are afraid of the male” (427-28). Minx comes into first type. She behaves in a masculine manner. Her decision to go for a sex change operation shows her desperation to act virile. She forces Amrita into a lesbian relationship with her. Lesbianism can be considered normal provided if both the partners are willing as in Socialite Evenings, Kumar Bhandari and Murthy are gay and in Starry Nights Aasha Rani and Linda enjoy lesbian relationship. But both share a fulfilling relationship contrary to one, which Minx wants to share with Amrita. As such, this relationship fails to satisfy her emotionally and she is always afraid of losing Amrita. De has preferred to give the novel a radically feminist turn, giving freedom and victory to Amrita.

Minx’s lesbianism is a revolt against society and norms laid down to underrate women. By belonging to Amrita, protecting and helping her, she poses a great threat to male dominance and disrupts patriarchal oppression while Amrita, too,
discards social taboos related to sexual behaviour and does not hesitate to sleep with Rover, the fashion designer. She acts like a liberated woman when the question of her marriage arises and her past with Minx seems to threaten her future. She refuses to hide anything from the man whom she wishes to marry. She dares to stay all alone in a city like Mumbai, far from home, to pursue her career. When Kanan advises her to tell everything to her parents about Minx, she boldly denies him saying that she shall handle it. Thus, she becomes a self-actualized person by successfully overcoming all the hurdles of her life. Both Minx and Amrita represent the different type of modern urban set-up. They present a very advanced class of women.

In sharp contrast to the previous novel is the fifth novel of Shobha De, *Sultry Days* (1994), a story of a teenage girl, Nisha Verma, who is also the narrator of the story. Nisha meets Deb or God on a sultry rainy day in Bombay. He is her senior in college. She is attracted towards him, because of the power he has over others and is a mixture of opposites. His appearance is dirty and shabby. He is a man of loose morals. His attitude towards girls is also scandalous –“use them and leave them” (8). Nisha hates this attitude of him. “I hated God when he said stuff like that. It was his explanation for everything. Any woman who didn’t instantly fall into one of his slots was frustrated and in need of a screw” (19). Despite his bad habits and dirty looks, ‘God’s hands and fingernails are surprisingly, neat and clean’ and is the master of foreign languages such as German, French and Spanish. He is the son of a communist and himself a communist, gets arrested while taking out Morchas. In the school, he also read Chaucer and Karl Marx. Earlier, he got a scholarship to Columbia University but could not go because his father refused to pay the airfare.

Nisha comes to know that God belongs to a rather poor family subsisting just above the poverty line whereas she comes from an affluent background. Her father
works in a multinational company. Shobha De is perhaps attempting to emphasize the fact that emotions like love know no barriers of class and caste. Her description of members of one class merging into the other class with great success is a truthful portrayal of metropolitan social life and cultural cross fertilization. However, the novelist can not restrain from writing about the problematic lives of Indian women residing in metropolis.

Nisha loves God and for her, he comes first though all her friends move away from her because of him. God also offers her to leave his company if it’s creating problem for her. But Nisha denies, for she finds character in him what others lacked. She joins an ad-agency after college. God often visits her in the office, always to ask for money. Nisha, by buying gifts for God, feels the satisfaction of being an earner, of being independent, the privilege of males in our society.

God does not have any reverence for his own parents. He hates rich people. His inordinate ambition leads him into the unreal world of pseudo, art for hire and compromised journalism. Now God starts sinking in the estimate of Nisha. To her God had at one time symbolized ‘commitment but gradually he loses all shreds of self-respect. As for Nisha, here is a very ordinary course of life wherein she tries to make her mark through sheer hard work and application. Although herself a member, yet she always remains at the periphery of affluent and glamour life. In other words, she is quite unlike the other women of Shobha De, who, live the life of glamour and sex.

Their careers take off with dizzy speed. God’s sole purpose is to acquire money and power while Nisha desires everything in life to be achieved through hard labour. As the years go by, God is corrupted by the good things of life that money can buy and becomes the chief confidant of a corrupt businessman-politician called...
Yashwanthbhai. He has started working on profiles of rich people, which helps him make enough money. This surprises Nisha, who knows very well that God is the one who does not like these rich people:

I am surprised at you, Deb. These were the people you used to detest at one time. Didn’t your father organize a lock-out at the Lala’s factories three years ago? And now you are accepting all sorts of invitations. …I don’t know. You have changed. You are becoming like everybody else. No wonder you don’t have the time to play the flute.

(160-61)

Nisha does not approve of God’s ‘new’ way of life. She finds it hard to hang around with God of today, when, what she really liked was God of yesterday. Nisha tries hard to be his conscience, telling and reminding him, his long forgotten commitments. But the occasional meeting between them sometimes turns in unhappy and unpleasant meeting. After one such ‘meeting’ God calls her ‘Jhooti bitch’. Being angry with this phrase she calls him as ‘capitalist Kutta’. It is actually the point when Nisha has completely seen through his so-called ‘commitments’. Although Nisha does not have any pronounced commitments of her own yet her constant companionship reveals the gulf between herself and God’s pseudo – commitments. Nisha begins to discover her own ideals and commitments whereas God starts moving away from the ones he cherished in the beginning and which attracted Nisha towards him. Now, Nisha begins to discover her own commitments.

Meanwhile Nisha comes to know about her father’s affair with a divorcee who works in his office. Her mother tells her of the affair. Her mother is fully aware of the fact that everybody in the party knows of the affair, still Nisha finds her mother’s attitude very brave in the Party. “My mother went through the evening gracefully, and
I felt very proud of her” (92). Her mother by now comes in contact with Mrs. Pratimaben, the wife of a busy businessman who calls herself the saviour of the lost souls. When Mrs. Pratimaben plans to start her boutique with Nisha’s mother as the manager, her father objects to join the boutique since the company wives do not work, they are simply meant to organize dinner parties and stay at home. But Nisha’s mother protests him and tries to do things, which are not approved by her husband. She stops wearing chiffons, and also going to her hair dresser for her weekly facials and hair set. She finally realizes her strength and comes out to confront her husband for the very first time in her life.

I am sick, do you hear, sick of living this false life. Varnishing my nails, setting my hair, wearing these silly saris and smiling through your office parties pretend nothing is wrong with my life. Well- it’s my turn now. And you can listen to me for a change. I will go along with Pratimaben with anything I choose to do. She is my friend. She encourages me. She appreciates me. She makes me feel like someone. So you can go to hell with your lectures and your Sindhi girlfriends- you don’t deserve me...whether you like it or not, henceforth I will make the decisions about my life. And the first one is that I’m talking a job. (242)

Nisha decides to live life in her own way. Her commitment towards the end of the novel emerges as a commitment to a cause. She emerges as a strong, determined and fearless woman who is ready to face any danger that may come her way. She exposes Yashwanthbhai through her write-ups. God also tells her: “Nisha... you have now become the city’s nasha (353). Actually Nisha’s rise has to be seen in the
context of the degeneration of God’s character. God no longer has a strong hold over her. She is now independent. It is through Deb that Nisha discovers herself.

In Shobha De’s novels a victimized woman is presented as facing life confidently. *Sultry Days* infers that a woman with a fully integrated personality, can solve many problems in her life and she needs not be a victim, a fact manifested through the powerfully drawn character of Nisha. The novel presents before us the glittering aspects of the so called high class society. For a moment the reader is blinded by the glitter and charm. But gradually the hollowness, the artificiality and the inner fragmentation of such a falsified life strikes them with cathartic revelation. For example, while hollowness of the class difference is shattered consistently, the folly of accepting the slavish subjectivity of women to male dominance is brought out, at the same time the feminine consciousness with its sustaining and pathological impact on family, community and society is proved time again. Kaplan stresses this fact in the following words which may be suitably applicable to *Sultry Days*:

> The psychic fragmentation expressed through female characters in women’s writings is seen as the most important sign of their sexual subordination more interesting and ultimately more meaningful than their social oppression. (Gayle 152).

In the novel Shobha De has presented a group of modern women, who make interesting case studies. Equally interesting is the novelist’s treatment of the position of women and their attitude to matrimony. For instance, Pramila, a non-conformist lady from, Nagpur, suffers from a big-city hang-up! Married to a mechanical engineer, she has everything a woman could ask for- “a husband with a ‘solid’ job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own and all the time in the world to pursue her interests”(262). Yet she feels bored and suffocated. She has talent of writing
poems. This puts ideas in her head and suddenly, without informing anyone she goes to Bombay to be regarded as “woman of substance” (267). She divorces her husband and starts writing poems. Later, she realizes it difficult to manage small children with a job, so she sends back one of her daughters to their father. In this world of glamour a stage comes when she over-reaches herself, she miscalculates that Yashwantbhai, an underworld don is in her power. This results in a traumatic experience. Yashwantbhai, being very powerful person, successfully intimidates her. Ultimately, Yashwantbhai and his people see to it that she is accepted in society as nothing better than a divorced woman of bad character or even a borderline whore. To become rich, famous and powerful person she discards her family life and comes to face the stress and strain of the high society of Mumbai. She is bold, daring and a woman of great stamina but becomes a victim of Yashwantbhai’s lust. In the novel Lotika also faces the same fate. There is another woman Karen who is married to Roy, who has an affair with ‘M’ (Maitreyee). The two of them led separate lives, putting in joint appearances only on the opening nights of his plays or at ‘important’ social events in the city.

Manju, another emancipated woman in the novel, “cares for just two things in the world- her job and her bank account” (193). “She married to an effeminate executive who had been a lobby manager at the hotel but had to switch jobs once it becomes clear that the wife was slated for the big time and not he” (192). Vicky was just the sort of milksop someone like Manju needed. Manju says: “You know how I hate entering the kitchen. I can’t make a cup of tea… forget that, yaar, I don’t even know how to light the bloody gas” (192).

Some other female characters may also be referred to briefly. Aarti, an account executive, is another bold woman in the novel who smokes charms holding
the cigarette awkwardly between her fingers and blowing smoke out of her nostrils.

Bindiya, a married lady who comes to Bombay from Calcutta, discards the monotonous, outdated lifestyle she has been forced to live with. She is having an affair with her cousin’s husband. In Calcutta her mother-in-law kept an eye on her, but in Bombay she found freedom: “While Bindiya had successfully ‘found herself’, everybody wrongly assumed that her dumb husband (who was known around town either, by his initials, M. B. or as Mr. Bindiya) had lost himself for good”. (210)

Then there is Shona, the model from London, shot to the top of the heap in no time at all. Her face is everywhere. Tanya is a talented but unknown singer. She has been born Lalita, but has decided to change her name when she turns eighteen. Her new play back career, keeps her busy.

The end of the novel however, is depressing for them as each one assumes that life without a man is meaningless. Female subjectivity is one of the most regressive elements in a social set-up. The women long for love, dependency and the material and emotional comfort of a fixed class identity. At the same time there is an ardent desire to be autonomous, so she is torn between the two and suffers quietly the ‘constraints of bourgeois feminity’ and oscillates between reason and desire, autonomy and dependent security, psychic and social identity. As Nisha says: “If man can pursue career ruthlessly, so can we, women declared at seminars and workshops for senior managers. . . . The poor husbands were caught entirely unprepared”(195).

Again in her sixth novel Snapshots (1995), De draws a very realistic image of the upper class metropolitan women and their unconventional life-style. The six school friends Swati, Reema, Surekha, Aparna, Rashmi, and Noor have drifted apart after finishing school. Snapshots centre around the reunion of these school friends
many years later in life. The conventional woman is a model of physical exploitation but De’s women, in this novel, are the masters of their destiny.

Swati, now living in London, proposes to arrange a get-together with all the friends, which is her project to come up with a “bold, meaty serial on the existing world of the Nineties’ Indian urban woman” (306). She leaves her college studies to join drama school in England. Yet she remains in the memories of her friends throughout. Although all her friends have been hurt or have suffered at the hands of Swati at one time or the other, yet they could not escape the magnetism that draws them to her. Swati, now a divorcee and powerful among the six women, is an embodiment of scheming, smart, modern woman of today.

Swati is the only child of her parents and is always left alone to deal with her problems as her parents are busy in their own social life. She is now the most striking woman who never feels a need for anyone’s support. She is financially and socially powerful woman, who dominates males and females alike. Swati’s life is an unending saga of sexual encounters. She is very out-spoken she claims, “We rejoice in our sexuality. We do not suppress it, we don’t dismiss it. Sex does not threaten us”(227-26). By using her body as the main bait, she manages to become a popular figure in the London high society. She does not hesitate to seduce Rohit, Aparna’s husband, just to take revenge.

Swati’s target hadn’t been Aparna’s man-it had always been and still was Aparna herself. The smart, cool and efficient, together Aparna.

The woman Swati secretly longed to be, but never could become. (278-79)

But Swati is clever enough to maintain the facade of being her friend. Swati marries a British but he divorces her for being “too self absorbed” (260). For her, marriage
never meant much. She says “We loved each other dearly but we led strictly individual lives” (261). In this novel Shobha De has made her female characters more powerful than their male counterparts. The portrait of Swati is a further illustration of the new woman’s self-confidence in exploring her potentialities. Throughout the novel, Swati is shown as a liberated woman.

Shobha De devotes a chapter each to describe the friends individually and thus gets ample opportunity of indulging in psychoanalytical details commenting not only on the Indian women of the nineties but also on how they perceive the coetaneous Indian male with his dominating chauvinistic attitude. Reema marries Ravi, a wealthy man who provides her with all material comforts of life but starving her for his much craved company. She has only one daughter and she has refused to become a child producing machine. Reema leads a lonely life bringing up her daughter Shonali.

Every man behaved similarly, Reema had concluded. Her husband was no better. And these days their love-making had to be squeezed in between her watching The Bold and Beautiful and his business calls.

During the cricket season, she recalled at least three sexual encounters accomplished to the drone of Test Match commentary with her husband pausing mid-thrust to applaud a stylish sixer.(129)

Reema uses her husband for her material luxuries and enjoys a promiscuous relationship with her brother-in-law, Randhir and suffers from no ‘guilty’ feelings. She uses her sexuality to control two men in her life. The patriarchal enclosure of matrimony has failed to trap her instead marriage has granted greater power to her. She negates the concept of marriage that presents the picture of man’s power and woman’s powerlessness. The prospect of Randhir walking out of the relationship does not bother her: “if I stop meeting Randhir, I’ll probably take up some other
hobby”(161). All the friends agree when Reema says- “Imagine not any other body, any other feeling, and any other sensation. Forever sounds terrible. Like eating dal-chaval day in and day out”(209). During her school going years, she had conceived her boy – friend Raju’s child. She suggests her friend Surekha, “Men like their comforts. And men are spoilt lazy babies. Feed them well. Fuck them regularly and sit tight. That’s the way to keep them. Control them. The rest is easy”(208).

The next friend Surekha had an arranged marriage with Harsh at the age of nineteen. She is part of a traditional household, which is controlled by her stern mother-in-law. She says: “I am an ordinary woman, who cares whether I’m happy or not?”(119). This truth reflects the psychological separation of Indian women. Surekha pretends to be very concerned about her mother-in-law but the hard truth behind this praiseworthy act is her lesbian interest in her school friend Dolly. Dolly doesn’t feel any jealousy from Surekha’s husband. For them, he is the man who bore their expenses. She manages to keep her husband happy and yet, insures a space of her own. Surekha’s relation with Dolly shows her hunger for loving relationship. Her married life though smooth, could not give her the emotional support she requires. Her mother-in-law’s strict attitude keeps her cold. Harsh never thinks of his wife’s desires. As such she moves away from him and finds solace in Dolly’s company.

Aparna, on the other hand, marries to Rohit, a flirt and extremely selfish person. Even after becoming a successful architect he seems less interested in having kids. Aparna, however, desires to be a mother. “I want kids, I like kids. I want to be a mother. I thought you wanted them too” (28). But Rohit’s one-man agenda never allows her to fulfil her basic need. Aparna’s adjustment to marriage is wholehearted. She forgives everything where Rohit is concerned:
He erred- she forgave. It was taken for granted that all differences were to be settled in just one way-his. And each time they fought, it was Aparna who was left feeling rotten and vaguely guilty as though the whole thing was somehow her fault; that it was her intensity that came in the way and spoilt everything; that it was she who expected too much; demanded too much; that men weren’t supposed to be a hundred per cent honest, or sincere; that it was unrealistic of her to hope for that with Rohit.(25-26)

As Karuna thinks in *Socialite Evenings* Aparna also thinks about women:

They were partner – specific. Not men. Any woman would do when the good old hormones were on the boil. She wasn’t looking for a fuck. She didn’t need sex (no shortage in that department). She wanted laughter and touches. Small, intimate moments. What she wanted was a steady, warm, attentive companion.(34)

Her retaliation is not so radical since she loves him dearly. Therefore, the subjection and humiliation she faces at the hands of her husband despite being a serious carrier person does not compel her to leave him. Finally, she divorces Rohit when she catches Swati and Rohit at her home sitting cozily together in her absence. Aparna finds it hard to forget him. She misses Rohit very much. But she is betrayed by him so at the same time she considers husband an awful word. “It wasn’t just a man she missed – it was Rohit, her husband. She hated herself for continuing to think of him in those terms…husband, husband, husband. Awful word”(34). Aparna was blamed for it while Rohit walked out on her with a clean chit. The Rohit – Aparna relationship offers a smarting commentary on the Indian culture which is basically male dominated, in which the woman is expected to obey his commands and
surrender to his whims and fancies. Now Aparna has become “a corporate woman, an
Indian corporate woman” (249). A business woman has come a long way from being
a doting and devoted wife to an economically and sexually emancipated woman. She
reaches the top rank of the corporate ladder. She starts an affair with Prem who is her
employee.

Women in *Snapshots* live their lives to the fullest. For them men are
secondary, their own selves are of primary importance. For them, “husband” is an
“awful” word and “marriage the destiny traditionally offered by society”(Beauvoir
45). They cannot tolerate any action of men which degrades their worth or
personality. They spurn the idea of being treated like the weak traditional housewives.
It is very evident, after Aparna’s sad experience, when Aparna says about her affair
with Prem “It’s a favourite male myth- another stupid stud fantasy, that’s all. The
truth is women don’t need men at all - there are ways and ways of seeking
satisfaction”(226).

The world of *Snapshots* is a world of women, where women begin to look at
things from their own point of view. De has created such females who speak about
different aspects of life, love and sex. De is successful in bringing the truth that
middle class Indian women mostly are devoted to their lovers and they accept the
physical pleasure from their male partners without guilt. In *Snapshots*, all the six
friends disregard male power totally by negating the norms of conventional female
codes of conduct given by patriarchy. Infact, they claim that the things men can do,
woman can do better. Being strong intellectually and physically they hold the reins of
power firmly in their hands. Shobha De very rarely allows her female characters to
become powerless creatures. In this new image the new women have got extreme
independence in almost every field and one of the most striking and interesting freedoms they enjoy is sexual freedom.

Rashmi is an unwed mother. She is an actress and has an illegitimate son by the wealthy but miserly film maker Parminder (Pips). He has plenty of money but he never bothers to help her. However, undaunted by her suffering she gathers enough strength to bring up Pips Junior by herself- but in the process she becomes a whore. Rashmi’s endless succession of relationships gives her no satisfaction, nor security; in each one of them she is a loser. Indeed her insatiable thirst for sex is a kind of revenge; a compensation for her own weakness and an expression of her need to have the kind of power than man has. Rashmi comments: “Mediocre women used sex as bait. Or food. It was the shrewd women ones who used their brains. And schemed throughout their lives to hold their men, keep them enslaved” (69). She at least, is happy for one thing that her son will escape that fate of the woman – thus reinforcing the age-old patriarchal belief in double standards. She has used men and in turn got used by them. She is an honest woman but she has found out that: “men didn’t like honest women. They preferred flirts and flatterers. Even manipulators. They felt more comfortable with them” (69).

Noor and Nawaz exemplify the dilemma faced by children of an unsettled and loveless marriage. Both her parents are always engrossed in their own extra- marital affairs. Noor does not dare to oppose her own brother Nawaz, who occasionally enters her bed. She is quiet, dreamy and submissive. After her accident with her boyfriend Amir while coming back from the college on his motorcycle, she had gone into coma. Later she had recovered physically, but mentally she has ceased to be the same Noor she used to be. Both her boyfriend and her brother have caused deep scars on her young mind. Noor is the only weak traditional woman represented in the novel who
suffers a lot. Her final release from her sufferings comes when she commits suicide at the end of the novel. Interpreted from the new woman’s point of view she is a pessimist and a weak woman far different for her friends who are daredevils and believe in new morality of sexual promiscuity.

By the end of their gathering at Reema’s place Swati is caught red-handed with her shrewdly hidden video-tape camera when she is about to leave. In the women characters of the novel, De projects the image of the highly self-confident, self-reliant and fearless modern woman. For De’s women, silence is not golden; they speak distinctly; use forbidden words and have gained the right to use the male sexual vocabulary. Women in Snapshots spurn the idea of being treated like the weak traditional housewives and live their lives to the fullest. They can not bear any action of men which degrades their worth. For them men are secondary, their own selves are of primary importance. The not so-pleasant sides of the lives of these women who live unconventional lives in consonance with the temper of the modern times particularly with the new trends of life of the sophisticated socialite women have been drawn by the novelist and other feminist writers.

The novel revolves around a psychoanalytical approach to women’s characters and emotions and reflects their sufferings due to social victimization. Men take advantage of the loneliness, ignorance and frustration of women, while women suffer from inner fragmentation in the absence of proper diversion. Social oppression leads to an identity crisis in women. The novelist infers that most marriages are made or unmade due to selfish motives. Ultimately she concludes that a society may be very progressive apparently but beneath the surface the woman’s status remains unchanged. The woman has to encounter solitude acerbity, frustration and alienation. She has to compromise at several levels. It is, therefore, essential that a woman should
be economically independent and also courageous enough to survive in the pressure of society. These women are strong, determined and have no hassles in behaving in any manner they like. They are more interested in materialistic gains and less about emotions. They can go to any extent to be successful in their fields. Though De often reflects on the plight of neglected wives, yet in this novel the married women enjoy an autonomy that can be matter of envy for many. De has deconstructed the conventional images of women and opposed the move to relegate woman’s experience and woman’s body language to the second rank.

In Shobha De’s *Second Thoughts* (1996), the conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of the character, Maya. The high society world, which is the familiar background of her earlier novels, has been replaced by the middle class society. Maya, who in spite of performing household duties devotedly, is not supposed to claim for equal rights as men. Sheila Ruth observes:-

> The complement of his masculine character is settled on his sexual complement woman, ‘I am man, she is woman. I am strong; she is weak. I am tough; she is tender. I am self-sufficient; she is needful”

(62).

In scintillating language and bold style, the novelist manifests how in an effort to adjust and to compromise between opposite cultures specially in the matrimonial setup, the Indian woman faces inner fragmentation, psychic disorder, nervous breakdown and in some cases becomes a schizoid. This novel is a successful attempt to deconstruct the plight of the new woman who, being cornered in a maze of domestic chores and ignored presence, takes bold and unconventional steps to keep her identity, her individuality intact.
The story deals with a young middle-class Bengali girl, born and bred in Calcutta. Maya, an educated and freedom loving girl, who makes an arranged marriage with a foreign returned Bengali boy Ranjan, a bank executive. The reason for liking Ranjan is her desire to be a part of the Mumbai world which to her is like a dreamland of glamour and beauty. Maya is more interested in Mumbai than Ranjan just as in *Socialite Evenings* Karuna is more fascinated with the car behind the photograph of her husband than at the prospect of having married to her husband. “Marrying Ranjan would make her a part of it immediately. If she were lucky enough to become the other Mrs. Malik, Maya knew she’d be bonded with Bombay forever” (16). Ranjan is very conservative on the question of Maya’s career in textile designing he declares, “I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman’s duty to run a good home” (14).

In any Indian family, the husband’s comforts always come first. Everything else follows. A woman has to sacrifice her own dreams. Later, on their way home Maya says: “How could they tell me not to work after marriage? Do any educated, trained girls stay at home these days; I didn’t like that remark” (18). *Second Thoughts* is a realistic representation of the psyche of the traditional Indian men. Although they claim to be the proud products of the twenty-first century, but deep down they still cherish and nourish the age old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of Indian men and women has hardly undergone any change. As individuals, they may have progressed but in the institution of marriage, the man is still the lord and a woman has to abide by his whims and fancies whether she likes it or not. The middle class family of a girl is ready to bow down to whatever whims and demands the boy’s family makes so the marriage is decided.
Maya’s disillusionment begins after marriage when she lands in Bombay. She realizes that despite Ranjan’s stay abroad, he is very traditional and above all, an insensitive husband. He imposes restrictions on her. The agony of Maya, who feels trapped in matrimony, is the central theme of the novel. Maya is eager to catch the life –style of Mumbai but her husband turns out to be a cold Indian male who believes that by marrying the girl he had bestowed a favour upon her. He tries to be an opposite of Maya and hates whatever is liked by her – even flowers or simple outings. Maya wants to be a perfect wife but she finds situations uneasy as he always wants all her attention towards himself. His attitude is self – centered. She says to Ranjan:

The truth, dear Mr. Malik, is that you have me here as a fulltime, domestic servant without pay. Shall I tell your colleagues that? And also tell them that you have forbidden me from pursuing a career even a part time one. (217)

Maya is not free to live in the house as she would wish to. The STD facility on phone is locked for her. Even she is not free to go anywhere in the city. De captures the middle class psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan- his attitude to hold on tight to the purse strings so as to control his woman, his lectures on wifely duties, and his complete control even on the use of the air conditioner. Maya knows that Ranjan can dare to do such things because he feels superior in some way to her and her background. Ranjan’s relationship with his mother is clear. He adores her and always gives examples of his mother to Maya and asks her to learn from his mother. He is a true son but not a husband. He does not share anything with Maya while he always gives his all report of the day to his mother. Due to his mother’s over-indulgence in their personal married life Ranjan is not able to relate with Maya. Ranjan’s mother
wisely makes selection of Maya as her daughter-in-law for she wants that a wife should act under the thumb of the husband. As she says:

It is always wiser to get a girl from a socially inferior background. . . .

A wealthier wife spells doom. The husband loses all control over her and she ends up having the upper hand. Such a marriage can never work which is why we were so careful while selecting the right candidate for Ranjan.(325)

Maya’s longing for adventure and romance often suffers a setback. Ranjan’s responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a house and four square meals a day. His complete indifference to Maya’s emotional desires hurts Maya immensely. He even refuses to share a single aspect of his life with her. So she feels miserable in his company. Although she is not tortured physically or in other way but she feels as she is losing her identity in his company. She says: “With him around, I seemed to hold my breath and walk around on tiptoes trying to appear as invisible as I possibly could” (129). Maya once asks him to take her out at least during the weekend. Ranjan replies: “Sometimes you talk like such a kid. Life isn’t picnic, you know. And you are not in Bombay on a holiday. As a married woman, you have to learn to deal with responsibilities” (37-38). Duty not only means to provide food, home and money, it also includes a certain amount of respect and affection for one’s spouse.

Under the same roof, they live as strangers as their sexual relationship is not normal. There is no sweet relationship between husband and wife. Once Ranjan returns from Calcutta after ten days, Maya shyly snuggles up to him and caresses him but to her shame and horror Ranjan jumps back and scolds her: “Stop behaving like a cheap woman. A prostitute, he had muttered before turning around and going to
sleep” (362). Sex is a complicated issue in their married life. Ranjan has a genuine lack of interest in Maya. Maya cannot share her feelings with anyone; she can not bear any child because of her husband’s lack of interest in physical –gratification and she has nothing creative to do in that city. She is in the miserable condition. In reality she is neglecting by her husband, in-laws and even by her own parents. She feels:

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belonged to them. My husband belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I did not have a single true friend to call my own. (372-73)

De shows the condition of most of the middle class women in India. She narrates the situation what Indian women have to face in which she has to suffer a lot. The hollowness of such marriages is evident even in the case of Maya’s parents, who hardly ever talk to each other and even their quarrels or heated arguments were out of question. Maya’s own case is far more pitiable: “Now here we were, locked together in a relationship that didn’t satisfy either of us” (352).

When Maya meets Nikhil, her college going neighbour who is cool and friendly, she feels that she has her own identity. Nikhil makes Maya feels that she has a right to exist. She enjoys his company. But her consciousness makes her feel ashamed. Her loyalty to Ranjan holds her back on a couple of occasion. Through Maya, De shows the attitude of middle class urban women. She takes the side of her husband. She thinks that Ranjan is not bad at all, he is her husband. De narrates in this episode a modern woman. Although Maya is loyal to Ranjan but she also wants to remain in Nikhil’s company as he brings a new meaning of existence for her. De wants to show that now woman has learnt to establish her identity. She can take any decision fearlessly and boldly.
Maya does not want to cheat her husband but only to enjoy her life in the open air with her own emotions and feelings. Nikhil enlivens her spirit and seems to understand her better than her husband, thus giving Maya a feeling of comfort which she had desperately looked for because her yearning for Ranjan’s love could not find the fulfillment she needed. Nikhil is the fourth floor neighbour’s son and junior to Maya by 5-6 years. When Maya is with Nikhil she does not care for anything. She wants to express her joy and happiness. When once Ranjan goes out of his business tour for ten days Maya feels free as a bird and allows her spirits to soar. She says: “His exit always generated a sense of exhilaration not because I did not want him around. But I felt free to breathe normally” (129). At this time Nikhil comes to Maya and asks her to go with him on riding. She agrees and enjoys a lot there. She says: “For the first time since my arrival in your city, I felt like laughing, singing, enjoying the salty sea are on my face. I looked at the sky and felt happy”(270). Maya’s friendship with Nikhil goes to the extent of physical intimacy. Their sexual union heals the wounds of Maya’s loveless marriage. A distressed woman is thus liable to seek out comfort from some other source. Maya is left with a deep sense of guilt. But she tries to overcome this guilt and resolves to live in the present. The initial guilt of allowing Nikhil to visit her later gives way and makes her confident to deal with either Ranjan or her mother-in-law if they happen to arrive. She thinks she should have made adjustments and compromises because marriages need a great deal of effort to run smoothly. Maya would recall her mother’s words: “The issue is, Maya, marriage involves sacrifices. And all the sacrificing has to be undertaken by the woman. The sooner you accept that, the happier you will be”(353).

With a little encouragement from Nikhil, now Maya is prepared to say goodbye to her present life with Ranjan without the slight regret. But the news of Nikhil’s
engagement with another girl left Maya shocked and stunned. When Maya wants to take bold decision, once again she is left all alone with her unsympathetic husband and mother-in-law. Maya also has the glimpses of modern woman in her. She has courage to take bold step, but the circumstances do not help her in her decision.

Nikhil seduced Maya and doesn’t come forward to marry her. It is at this juncture that Shobha De throws light on the reality of the people who fall in Nikhil’s category. He takes advantage of the limitations and weakness of lonely ladies and Maya is just an addition to his endless list. Shobha De wants to show what woman has to pay for marriage is often too high. Circumstances compel Maya to change her mind and in desperation she deceives Ranjan, otherwise she is not a woman of easy virtue. But ironically, at the end of the novel, we see that she has only deceived herself. Through Maya, Ms. De takes up the burning question of woman’s freedom in contemporary India where the protagonist finds herself in a complex human situation aggravated by social, historical and cultural changes. The Second Thoughts that arise in Maya’s mind could very well be the harbinger of the ‘first thoughts’ that could come to the mind of the new woman of the future, who has to take decision to assert her individuality and establish her identity. And on second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Bombay, but also of her marriage. With this novel, De’s critics will have to think twice before labeling her the evergreen ‘Queen of Pornography’.

The protagonists of De’s novels portray the tortured consciousness of the urban middle class woman, who, in quest of their identity undergoes a metamorphosis-from a silent sufferer to a hard-core rebel, breaking with the age-old restraining ethics of the male-dominated world. At times, the rebellion of the women take the extreme forms such as sexual promiscuity or extra-marital relations which
serve as a device for them to assert their “self”. De’s females have crossed the barrier of two thousand years old suppression and are on the verge of retaining their lost glory. However, after the age-old exploitation the sudden freedom sometimes can be misleading. Yet, today’s modern women are striving hard to achieve what they have ever wanted - freedom to be themselves. If Miras of yesteryears can leave their husbands to go after their devotion, their Krishnas, why can’t the woman of today live alone or seek divorce to pursue her dreams of physical and financial freedom!

History reveals that man, the controller of power, dominates over woman, the prototype of powerlessness. In Shobha De’s novels this standard equation has often been radically altered and women with increased awareness of gender roles and gender identity have emerged as serious contenders of power game. They participate actively in this game of power to manipulate, deconstruct and to create new traditions. Outspoken Shobha De rightly observes:

Eventually every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level. Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women’s destinies have been determined largely in that context alone. It is time they were made aware of their potential and power. Man will have to come to terms with woman power. *(Shooting from the Hip 112-13)*

In literature woman’s desire for economic self-sufficiency is either ostracized socially or ignored completely. But De’s women, realizing that female empowerment is a product of financial independence are very often career-minded personalities. Man’s insistence on economic control emerges from his knowledge of the best way to keep women slaves or paralyzed. De has granted financial freedom to her female creatures. They either earn individually or control the finances of their husbands and
battles to control power. The realization that their power is rooted in their sexuality, it has a potential and it is not a danger, has enabled them to challenge the traditional concept of morality.

Truly, man deems himself God and considers it woman’s obligation to give him all those pleasures that have been snatched from him by God because of her. Docile and mute women are safe and thus they are encouraged to lead a subordinate life. Knowledge and discretion, two significant components of power, rarely become attributes of women. Happy with their imbecility, they remain unconsciously in the periphery while men enthrone themselves in the centre. Further, a self-sufficient woman can never be pleasurable for a man because she can seldom act as a docile servant. Shobha De’s fiction does not reclaim lost treasures of tradition but to move ahead with the changed moods of society. In this respect, Shobha De as a feminist writer often presents an account of her own life’s experience, which enables her readers to be aware of the change in reality. No longer is woman a scrubbing maid and a docile bed-partner. She manipulates to live lavishly by controlling her husband’s sexual urges. The image of man that emerges from Shobha De’s novels is generally negative. A male character is almost invariable portrayed as seducer, exploiter, wife-beater, rapist, torturer, or a cruel and callous husband or a weak character.

Shobha De conforms to the vamp ideology of feminism in the sense that she shows how self-destructive the attempts to achieve liberation have been for her protagonists. It is precisely because of the inherent lopsidedness and orthodoxy of the patriarchal system that perpetuates male-hegemony. De admits of no redemptive formula for the ‘fallen women’ and no millennium for the liberated women. Her women characters who endeavour to liberate themselves often meet with disaster.
Before this happens, they send a whole host of taboos devised by patriarchal order cart wheeling. This is how we should appreciate the crusaders of a different kind like Anjali and Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* and Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*. Shobha De sees through the male-operated conspiracy of silence that is the sorry lot of Indian women at large. Her women characters act according to the dictates to their own will and defy the farcical codes and phoney mores of the social system.

The bulk of Indian literature claims to be universal but its spirit is patriarchal. It seldom records a woman’s story in its entirety. Shobha De deconstructs the tradition and explores the experiences of women nearly on all her novels. Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who have devoted themselves mostly to the portrayal of socio-political reality, Shobha De explores the inner and psychic reality. Her creative venture does not focus the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean but the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below the surface. She prefers to delve deeper in a character or a scene, rather than going round about it. She prefers the private to the public world. She, as a self-realized and a bold person, writes incessantly projecting the concerns of her true self. She coolly retorts to the provoking reactions on her writings:

> I don’t align myself with anybody; I’m completely independent-as a writer. I don’t have to please anybody so I don’t suck up to anybody. I can do what I want to. I don’t have to care about offending anyone . . . I know what the real self is deep down and I never fool myself. That is my strength. (qtd. in Ashwina Vakil)

Even though there have been a number of presentations of women in the works of other women novelists, De’s image of the woman stands apart from the rest. De’s woman aspires for achieving equality with man in all spheres of life. De boldly
rejects all kinds of subterfuge and communicates the unprintable aspects of woman’s story. R.K. Singh rightly observes about Shobha De:

Women writers like Shobha De are more realistic and down to earth, perhaps more sophisticated in their stand to empowerment of women: they illumine the real human condition: they expose the way girls think and talk to each other when they are alone or in sexual encounters of any kind, and they depict careerist women who are more cautious in using man (as men use women). They assert their feminine desire and sexuality, gender awareness and self-definition, existence and destiny.

(60-61)


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