CHAPTER V

A Comparative Analysis of Feminism in Shobha De and Namita Gokhale’s Novels
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Both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale emerged as the feminist voices of the Indian English fiction in the final decades of the twentieth century and have continued to do so in the twenty first century. Both of them present the contemporary women of the Indian society who have succeeded to a great extent in asserting their own identity. Their women characters have come out of the confinement of moral codes that a male-dominated society had created for them and from which it had kept the males out. In this respect both De and Gokhale are different from the earlier Indian English women novelists like Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabwala and Kamala Markandaya. Both of them are quite frank in their treatment of sex – an area where the earlier novelists were either silent or merely suggestive. Both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale emerged on the Indian literary scene in 1980s. Both grabbed the attention of the reading public with their first novels. Both of them have tried to express the aspirations of the contemporary Indian women. In the novels of both of them, we find a phase of feminism where women no longer want equality with men but are concerned with shaping their own individual course of life.

The novels of both the writers have been considered cheap and vulgar and a form of popular fiction, especially the novels of Shobha De. A deeper study of their novels, in this context, reveal that they have not only concentrated on the presentation of a strange and startling world making the emergence of recent trends in society but also shown their concern for the problems faced by contemporary high society women. Thus their depiction is ingrained in reality, and not in idealism. The ways they have presented women’s life and attitude in their novels bring out their feminist
leanings. Both the novelists do not proclaim to be a feminist yet they are sensitive enough to expose different ways of women’s subjugation in a male oriented society. Their concentration on modern women’s life and their problems make the presence of feminist perspective an essential aspect of their fiction.

In comparison to Namita Gokhale, Shobha De is more strident in her feminism. Through her novels and essays, she has tried to expose patriarchal hegemony in Indian society and underlined the assertion of the rights of women. Her novels indicate the arrival of new Indian woman, eager to defy rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. She herself says:

In India we treat women strangely. We either worship them or we burn them. If that sounds like an extreme sentence so is our peculiar attitude. If images of Durga were found in some of the houses where daughters-in-law were sent up in flames for not having brought along a handsome dowry, such contradictions co-exist so naturally that they go unnoticed. Especially by men. (*Shooting from the Hip*, 108)

Like the novels of Namita Gokhale, in all Shobha De’s novels too a woman is the protagonist. De’s treatment of the contemporary urban woman’s position, predicament, values, challenges and the life-style is not without significance. She gives a very clear picture of the society and culture of the high class society of contemporary India. Herself being a part of that society she dares to portray the seamy side of both the traditional and the modern ways of living of the new-woman. She gives a vivid picture of the new woman who resides in the rapid world of this aristocratic circle. Even though there have been a number of presentations of women in the works of other Indian women novelists, De’s image of woman stands apart
from the rest. Her woman aspires for achieving equality with man in all spheres of life. It is worth noticing that De’s women are daring and fearless. Through her women characters De has given a full throated message in her novels that no man should underestimate woman and that her woman is here to stay and man beware of the new reality.

In a bid to free themselves completely from dependence on man, De’s woman indulges in an alternative form of sexuality. The forms of sexuality these women frequently exercise include homosexuality, heterosexuality, mechanical and oral sex. For these women, sex no longer remains something sacred and they often change their bed partners. Almost all of the women in De’s novels experience sex with more than one person. These women seem to stand by the radical feminist proposal of replacing the patriarchal way of life. The thoughts of these women like Anjali, Karuna, Ritu, Si, Aasha Rani, Sudha Rani, Mikky, Alisha, Aparna, Surekha, Rashmi, Swati and Meenakshi mark the onset of a sexual revolution. Their attitude and behaviour shows their belief that a radical change is essential to make the present system congenial for women. From this perspective, the women in her fiction are more powerful than men. Her women may or may not be sex-oriented yet they are much more physical than their mothers have been. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that Shobha De has done a marvelous job as a skilled feminist writer.

Even though Shobha De has at times rejected the tag of a feminist novelist, she has been voicing feminist concerns since her very first novel, *Socialite Evenings*. In it she has depicted the marginalization of women in Indian society. Her father’s instructions to Karuna reveal the set of behaviour a patriarchal society expects a woman to follow:
Why do you want to go to cinema? Why can’t you stay at home and improve your mind? . . . A person must have discipline and regular habits. . . . Lights off at 10 p. m. and up at 5.30 a. m. No eating between meals. No idle talks over the telephone. And no unnecessary laughter. (16)

After her marriage her husband represents another facet of male-domination. Women were put in a secondary position where their needs and aspirations had no reckoning.

The words in which Karuna reacts to the condition of married women that she observes around her shows her deep dissatisfaction with not only her own life but also of those that she knows:

My friends were stuck with similar husbands. I guess that made us all feel better. We often discussed them and agreed what bores the lot of them were. . . . Like our mothers before us, despite the pretensions of our unmarried youth, we concentrated on the lives of our growing children. We lived through them, a vicarious, precarious existence. We clung to the status quo of being ‘Shrimati so and so’ and we refused to take risks. As for the husbands, they came into the picture only in crisis – a death in the family, a kitchen accident or something that required a man’s intervention. Our love making (if I could call it that) was a listless affair – making love was losing calories to him. I saw it nothing more than a vague habit. (95-96)

The words in which Karuna refers to love making mark a clear shift in the representation of sex in Indian English fiction. In her, De presents a character who is capable of living life on her own terms. Her breaking out of the bonds of matrimony
and making her own professional career symbolizes the feminist assertion of a woman’s right to live her own life.

If *Socialite Evenings* is the story of an emancipated woman Karuna, Shobha De’s *Starry Nights* describes the life of Aasha Rani, the movie queen of Bollywood and sweetheart of millions. De's feminist concerns can be traced in her depiction of women's maltreatment at the hands of men who have no regard for women's feelings, emotions and their self respect. Women are used as mere commodities. For example, Gopal's comment about Aasha Rani, "Kyonji kya cheez hai" (*Starry Nights* 5) and the people's reference to her as "Another Southie Idli" (43) reveal men’s mindset. They treat women as their subjects and want to possess them as material objects. Kishenbhai's words express man's possessive attitude towards women, "She was his woman. His....His property" (22). Women in men's world are dehumanized, dishonoured and subjected to inhuman experiences. Aasha Rani is reduced to a mechanical, lifeless toy during her sexual encounters with different men like Seth Amirchand. She is prepared by Mastaan in an undignified way to gratify the sexual urge of his Seth and is made to behave in indecent, shamelessly degenerating manner. She is made to play the role of a sexual object. Men indulge in bizarre and outrageous behaviour to exercise their power over women.

Geetha Devi, mother of Aasha Rani, had to bear all the misfortunes as she was discarded by her husband to fight poverty all alone. She, however, remains meek and subservient as she was in the beginning. She was often threatened by her husband who hurled abuses at her, neglected her, deprived her of money and ultimately deserted her after his remarriage with a dancer. Aasha Rani painfully recalls: “Amma used to be in tears often enough when appa showed up stinking of liquor, with
bloodshot eyes and speech that slurred” (45). Geetha Devi was not only ill treated by her husband but also by Girija whom she intended to marry. She had to sell all her jewellery and shift to slums with her growing daughters. It is only by selling her flesh that her mother could pay for Aasha’s dancing-lessons. It is, now, Aasha’s turn to repay the debt. So her mother pushes her in the never-ending gluttony of blue films and then through sex in the crass-world of Bombay cinema.

Aasha Rani also suffers at the hands of her younger sister Sudha who has stolen everything from her. It is an excruciating misery for her to be deceived by her sister whom she had supported physically, mentally and financially too. Having reached the peak of stardom, Sudha shows professional jealousy towards her sister. She vomits venom against Aasha Rani in her interview for a magazine. For her image as a star, she tarnishes the image of Aasha Rani. The meeting of Aasha Rani and Sudha ends in smoke because Aasha Rani vituperatively blames Sudha for what she had done. Instigated by her mother, Sudha betrayed her sister and thus tried to destroy her married life as Aasha Rani angrily blurs out: "You have stolen my money. Stolen my films. Stolen my lover. Been unkind to our parents. Lied, cheated and deceived everyone”. (305)

_Starry Nights_ furthers the themes of liberated women of the elite society; it is but an extension of the frontiers of feminism. This is how its shocking pornographic details that jar the sensibility of an untrained reader should be viewed and appreciated. Sexual encounters and compromises are a routine affair in Asha’s life. In her infatuation for Akshay, the reigning star of the film-world, Aasha Rani feels no qualms of conscience in performing oral-sex with him. In fact, she uses her sexual power, instead of any ability for good acting, to win a worthwhile place in films.
Shobha De has powerfully portrayed the shattering human values of this glittering society. Her novels occupy themselves with the themes of over-powering materialism, lack of spirituality and the resulting inner conflict, the lack of identity of women, and the crumbling moral values. Female sexuality finds new dimensions, as women here are not contented with heterosexual relationships only. It finds expression and consummation in lesbian relationships and mechanical methods of gratifying the sex urge. In their bid to find substitute means of sexual gratification that do not involve dependence on man, women indulge in strange and shocking sexual practices. Aasha Rani is certainly not very happy with male and his exploitation. Even her mother has exploited her as a moneymaking machine. The only man whom she really loves, Akshay Kumar, cannot treat her better than a kept since he is married. Thus her lesbian affair also implies her escape from her frustrating situation. Yet, the only such affair that she has with Linda leaves such a powerful impact on her mind that she is not able to forget it and as observed above, "It could never be with a man" (137). On a deeper level of her consciousness this experience also implies independence from man.

Shobha De suggested in *Starry Nights* that consciously or unconsciously women have always fought for their identity but in modern times the mode of struggle has changed. Women break all barriers to assert themselves but they still demand what they have always desired, i.e., protection, love, care, compassion and understanding. Their journey, no doubt, is arduous but their indomitable will and undefeatable spirit compels them to carry on their struggle. In spite of the frustrating and painful experience the women are not passive victims. They explore different possibilities of a happy, emancipated life instead of seeking sympathy or crying over their helplessness and miserable condition the women struggle to earn a viable space.
Aasha Rani’s exploitation by men in the showbiz and her husband, Jay's deserting her does not curb her desire to live a life of her own. She decides to rebuild the film studio of her father and find solace in being a dutiful mother.

The educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De's novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death is replaced generally by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenience to lead a comfortable life which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partner. The change in attitude towards marriage represents according to De, “a big step forward.”

The terms underlying marriage have…been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self–sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry; it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a long–time meal ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go. (Shooting from the Hip 112)

The young men in this world of self promotion marry for prestige and acceptability. Marriage is no longer considered a sacred bond between two selves that bring peace and harmony in individual as well as social life. Instead of being a source of solemn unity, it becomes a struggle involving relation of power. As all the relationships in the contemporary world of money and power have been commercialized, the institution of marriage also gets influenced by these
considerations. This power struggle of relationships is directly influenced by money. For example, a small-time film actor's wife tells about her experience to Aasha Rani. In the struggle of power in her married life she is made to realize that she is nothing more than a glorified ayah. Her husband says:

> From this day that is all you are in this house. A glorified ayah. And remember, this is my house. I pay all the bills with my hard-earned money. If the arrangements don't suit you, get out. Look for someone else to shelter you. (328)

The woman could survive ultimately by working in a boutique. In a married life, in which Aasha Rani had been, the advice of her father seems quite relevant and very important that power lies with the purse – and whoever controls that controls the relationship.

Shobha De shows Malini in this novel as a traditional wife existing on one extreme of femininity who wants to possess her husband forever. She is all devotion and dedication to her star-husband, Akshay Arora, who consistently shares his bed with Aasha Rani. De wants to convey the message that marriages are a means of perpetuation of the patriarchal order. A women’s being is annihilated on the altar of marriage. De seems to believe that a marriage is but an infructuous exercise undertaken by two partners to realize each other fully. Malini, Akshay's wife, could never enjoy the consumption of sex with her legitimate husband. She is more of a woman tied up in the shackles of a lopsided moral order than an individual like Aasha Rani.

Like other novels, in *Sisters* also De has presented liberated working women - defiant, wealthy, and brimming with confidence and asserting for their position in
society. In the beginning itself, Shobha De makes her intentions clear. Her women are not going to be emotionally weak females. On the contrary, they are to be assertive and strong. As the action of the novel unfolds, both the girls continue to indulge in their single-minded pursuit, which is to lead a luxurious life. Mikki has to face the trauma of her parents' untimely death in air crash. Society considers that tender feelings are intense in women and they do not come out easily from an emotional shock, but in spite of being frantic with worry or grief, Mikki does not lose her patience and courage. Boldly, she prevents her maidservant to weep. "Gangubai, please stop that, she said, what has happened has happened." (Sisters 3) This confidence to face this intimate loss shows that her independent personality cannot be choked because of her feminine tendencies. Unlike traditional woman, De's women are not excessively emotional.

Woman is a female to the extent that she feels herself as such.... It is not nature that defines women; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life." (Beauvoir, The Second Sex 69)

De's Mikki believes in Beauvoir’s dictum and does not succumb to prescribed code for women by the patriarchal society. After her father’s decease, Mikki is over burdened with responsibility of her father’s entire business, which is unfortunately running in loss. To know the standing of her father’s industries, she says to Raman Kaka, a trusted employee of her father, to arrange a meeting with solicitors and accountants. But he suggests her not to step into her father’s shoes because it is not befitting for a woman. Mikki emphatically declares:
Thank you for your advice, Raman Kaka. I appreciate and value your words. But I would like you to hear a few of mine now. I can’t change my sex, unfortunately. That is the one thing all of you will have to accept. But I can change just about everything else...and I intend to. Fate has left me in my father’s shoes. Had I been the son he never had but constantly longed for, perhaps I might have had more success with the likes of you. I don’t expect you or the others to give up your prejudices- but I want you to know that I will not let that stand in my way. This is going to be my show and I intend running it on my terms.

Here Mikki challenges the usual orthodox ideas of a society, which considers women subdued, not able to do any creative work. Her determination is to save her father’s companies at any cost. She tries to borrow money from her fiancé, Navin. When she realizes that Navin is not willing to respond to her wish, she breaks off her engagement with him without caring for what people will say about it.

*Sisters* provides us with another unexpected husband-wife relationship. Man and woman do not become one in marriage; they become partners in love. Economic freedom, promiscuity and uncontrolled passion resulting from 'the lust of the blood' make most men and women vulnerable and the resultant frustration in life engulfs them. The wife strives continuously to love and win her own man but the husband behaves totally against his wife’s expectations. Having realized that her first love Navin could not meet her demands and Shanay would not be a suitable husband, Mikki turns to Binny Malhotra, enjoys sex before marriage and marries him against the will of Amy, Shanay and Ramanbhai. It is through her intimacy with her husband...
that she realizes her self and finds a sense of security. She is proud of being a wife of Mr. Binny. She represents a typical traditional wife by completely submitting herself to her husband. Binny, a womanizer is infidel, already having mistress, family and children. He marries Mikki to keep up his pride and image in the society. Satisfied with his mistress and children, Binny, the husband, deprives his wife of her right to motherhood and forces her to undergo abortion and threatens to divorce her. The husband fails to realize the individual rights of his wife and fails to perform necessary moral deeds by denying individuality, independence and emotional security to her. The insincere and fraudulent attitude of Binny is reflected in these statements:

No questions – you don’t have the right. And none of this cheeky business. I will not tolerate it. You have spoilt my morning. My day will go badly now. I have tensions at work. I don’t need tensions at home. Understand? When I say “Butter my toast”, you butter it. That’s all. (187-88)

Binny inflicts verbal scars on her sensitive and emotional mind and tortures her with his imposing and oppressive behaviour. Mikki was "willing to compromise her own life if it meant he'd notice her, listen to her, acknowledge her existence" (227). But her dream to enjoy the fruits of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. She begs and pleads innocence earnestly: "Binny, why? Why are you doing this? What have I done? I love you. Only you. I'm innocent. Please Binny....I can't live without you". (229-30). Mikki is an ideal wife whereas Binny is callous and indifferent person whose irresponsible behaviour destroys human bond between the wife and the husband.
Fidelity, sacrifice and devotion to the spouse are something expected only from a woman in a patriarchal society. She is expected to negate her own identity. Most women subordinate themselves to domestic duties and waste a great deal of time for monotonous and tiresome chores without doing something creative. Though Mikki is loyal to her husband and marriage, yet she does not believe in the subordination of woman. As a progressive and pragmatic lady, she does not want to confine herself within four walls of a house. However, being a representative of this rigorous social system, Binny does not allow her to work outside.

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 protest against Binny results from her innate desire for freedom. Ironically, she never thinks of a life beyond marital bounds. It is her dream to be both an ideal wife and a responsible social being that gives the novel a moral dimension. For Mikki, materialistic pleasures without freedom of the 'self' mean nothing. In fact, Shobha De's women have been liberated from the economic constraints. What they search for is the personal freedom, denied which they turn rebellious. They express their anger by resorting to what might be termed as unethical acts that is breaking the marriage oaths or indulging in extra-marital relations.

Shobha De's voice for woman's equality with man is not protest in soft voice. Her woman is woman of action ready to break all social orthodoxy, which shows her determination to grab the huge fortune with a strong individualistic identity in a habitually male dominated society. In this patriarchal regime, man has all rights to decide everything and to direct woman in every way but De’s woman, on the
contrary; is not ready to be puppet in man’s hand. She has power to smash the traditional image of woman and she has strong hatred towards this patriarchal male culture.

Amrita in *Strange Obsession* is developed by the novelist as neither a Sita nor Savitri who stood for absolute chastity, piety and patience. She was a free woman in several ways and bold and assertive at least in the beginning. As the action progressed she became almost a slave in the hands of Minx, 'the terrible'. But of course, it should be pointed out that she continued to be a woman with a sense of identity who was caught on the horns of a dilemma.

In fact, through these creations, De is rejecting and deconstructing man made images of women and an alternative female identity is created where a woman sometimes takes the role of man and another takes the role of a 'free woman'. Under this strict patriarchal regime, De's woman has designed her own codes of conduct which are free of the established gender roles and sexual restraints of traditional society. In her novels, women characters are not victims of male chauvinism. They are also enjoying the same rights as men.

*Sultry Days* is one of Shobha De's most striking attempts at propagating the idea that female subjectivity is not just slavish succumbing to male dominance but every woman is a staunch feminist in her heart resisting male injustices, sometimes using her physical charm and sexuality as an unfailing weapon and ultimately it is the woman who sustains the psychologically fragmented man. The novel infers that a woman with a fully integrated personality can solve many problems in her life and she need not be a victim, a fact manifested through the powerfully drawn character of Nisha Verma.
Marriage is not regarded as essential in *Sultry Days*. Deb remarks: “Who knows about marriage-sharriage…. I am happy as I am.” (*Sultry Days* 45) When he does condescend to marry Nisha, it is out of practical considerations:

> If you want, I don’t mind a shaadi-waadi – I know that will make you feel better. Theek hai – we can be bourgeois and go through with that marriage rubbish.... Give me my daal-roti, a warm bed, twice-a-week maalish and a daily screw. That's all I expect. (261)

The fact that Deb never marries Nisha, although he has a prolonged affair with her, speaks voluminously about his belief in the irrelevance of the institution of marriage. The views of the novelist get reflected better through women characters. 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". (161) In Bombay, she tries to get around in 'the right circles' and to make 'the right moves,' her chief aim being to be regarded as a "Woman of Substance". (163) 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". (226) The Khannas and Baroochas also typify dissipated marriages. Ruki Khanna is "a virbant, bright person who attracted all sorts," loves to receive "post-coital gifts" from her lover, is regarded as "outrageous, witty, sharp and sexy" and flirts in a seductive way. (273) Commenting on their marital status, the narrator confides:

> They’d been married five years now. Five stormy, tempestuous years.

> It was the second the round for both of them. His first wife had left him.
for his best friend, while Ruki had driven her husband to suicide… She was looking for a home. Not just any home. Preferably, a penthouse.
He wanted a glamorous woman to prove to the world he wasn’t impotent. He actually was. (272)

In the course of her various interviews and conversations Shobha De has reiterated the independence of women without compromising her role as a householder. *Sultry Days* is deeply rooted in this firm conviction of the novelist. The emphasis is laid, in episode after episode, on proper education of women before she can step forward for a meaningful reaction and revolt against the patriarchal social system without being branded as a rebel. Revolt is creative whereas rebellion is destructive. An in depth analysis of *Sultry Days* brings before us three significant examples of women. One is God's mother, who meekly, surrenders to her husband's and to the son's whims and fancies, being improperly educated. On the other hand, Nisha's mother, accepts painful subjection to her husband, yet being educated she does not surrender in a meek manner and at the first possible opportunity reacts to her husband's snobbery, hypocrisy and lechery without compromising her family life. Nisha's mother is a typical example of a feminist in Shobha De's doctrine and her inner strengths and composure provide tremendous boost to Nisha's personality who is the third type of female character delineated dexterously realistically, meticulously and meaningfully in the novel. In fact, Nisha learns to be courageous from her mother and both the women begin to sustain the men in their lives. That is why while her husband is rejected, neglected and ignored by all his erstwhile so-called liberal female acquaintances, Nisha boosts his morale single handedly when he is on death bed and transfers much of her inner strength to his thereby making his death peaceful.
Through *Sultry Days* we are made to understand that while men pose to be the masters and claim to be in complete command of all situations in life, in reality they are like misguided, pampered spoilt children who need support and sustenance of a woman whether it is a mother, a wife or a sister. On the other hand women for a while, may be confused by their conventional subjugatory roles and may feel handicapped by their accepted status of being the weaker sex yet the undeniable fact is that like Nisha and her mother they have a much stronger personality steadying and balancing society in general and their respective domestic lives in particular.

In her earlier novels, De has generally followed the more traditional linear mode, occasionally branching out into the archetypal feminine cyclic narration; her later fictional and non-fictional works are marked with a definite change in her vision of life. The novelist has tended to be more introspective and contemplative about life beyond the glamour and superficiality of the elite society vis-à-vis the fair sex. Shobha De's *Snapshots* centers around the reunion of a group of six school friends several years later in life. Most of them are “married career women, leading predictable, mundane lives of domesticity and imagined bliss”(70). The women portrayed in *Snapshots* become vehicles of the novelist's preoccupation about Indian society and the status of women. Men may regard women as commodities to be bought and sold, always at their beck and call whereas the woman having roots in the concept of traditional servility stands meekly suffering and forbearing a great deal of emotional stress striving hard to discover the human being in them. Thus Rashmi suffers emotionally and undergoes humiliation and debasement confronting simultaneously the acute dilemma of bringing up a son as a single mother. Aparna and Swati are divorcees. They considered sex as a matter of mutual need, mutual
dependence: “Sex is not filthy…. our minds make it so. Look at Khajuraho- the highest form of religion” (164).

The tradition started by Namita Gokhale, is successfully carried on unhindered by Shobha De in her novels. Being a metropolitan woman herself, De could very minutely describe the dreams of the modern woman. Her females in Snapshots, economically independent, are also sexually liberated. These women consider their sexuality as an effective weapon in the power game of relationships. Even a brothel owner like Champabai says:

Never give yourself to any man for free. You know why? Men don't value anything they get so easily. That's why we are here: to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over women. Power over us--you and me. (60)

Their casual approach to marriage gives the impression that they are not seriously inclined to find lasting solutions to their problems. Their attitude towards marriage is governed by practical considerations and mercenary designs. For example, Surekha advises Aparna to marry again. Her advice carries a hint about these women’s pragmatic approach to marriage, “So what if Rohit left you for some other woman? ... But for career women it is important to have a man to back them up. Nobody takes them seriously otherwise” (149). Similarly, there are women who treat marriage in functional terms. They tend to take a man for a ride and marriage suits their purpose. For these women, "He was merely the man who paid all the bills and demanded his conjugal rights periodically” (158). These women keep on with their unhappy marriages for the sake of their comforts and indulge in mechanical
relationships treating sex as the 'ticket to keep the marriage going'. These women lack the clarity of vision. Reema expresses the typical nature of these women:

Most of the women are like me--married early to men they didn't know. Didn't like. They are bored with their husbands. Nothing new happens in the bedroom. At least by talking about it we know that this restless feeling goes on everywhere. Every woman longs for....I don't know what. (214)

Their drifting nature does not allow them to take marriage seriously. Sometimes their heightened sense of self-importance and their self-seeking nature destroys their marriage. Reema, indulges in incestuous relationships with her husband's brother, Surekha has lesbian relationship with Dolly. In this context such women represent an exhausted generation of women who do not have faith in marriage. For them marriage is just a transaction of convenience and hence is meaningful as long as it is useful. Swati marries, divorces and remarries. Her friend Rashmi keeps a sexual relationship with a film maker and becomes mother without her marriage. Aparna has marital disharmony and divorces her husband. Reema uses her husband for material comfort and enjoys a promiscuous relationship with her brother-in-law, Randhir. Surekha is married but shares a lesbian relationship with Dolly. The following words about Swati show how these women treat marriage as a useful platform to gain wealth and lead a comfortable life:

She calculated swiftly. What Juan was offering her would make her a very rich woman. Rich and secure. Besides, he wasn't asking for anything in return. Nothing at all. Just her hand in marriage and her body in bed. She'd be an absolute fool to refuse. (185)
These ideas show a perceptible change in these women’s attitude that reduces marriage to a commercial transaction. In *Snapshots* we find that all the young ladies accuse men for their miseries. Rashmi feels, "Basically, I think all men are bastards" (Snapshots, 224) while Aparna added that men were jealous of the 'self-sufficient' women. Rashmi, in addition considered men to be 'slave drivers' always demanding something or the other and expecting the women to be perfect all the time and yet concluding that men were indispensable remarking how Balbir had spent his most enjoyable moments with women who were depressed and he was greatly pampered because he always satisfied their ego and made them feel wanted.

Shobha De, with perfect psychological insight, has commented upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women coming from different backgrounds. Each recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of a woman's loneliness, ignorance and frustration placing blame on the woman in the end. The Indian woman lives within the constrictions of several social taboos simultaneously needing emotional release from time to time but in absence of proper diversions she suffers from inner fragmentation. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that the woman's responsibility towards the family is total whereas any sort of authority is conveniently denied to her. A woman too has a mind which if ignored can lead to disastrous consequences. *Snapshots* revolves around a psychoanalytical approach to women’s characters and emotions and reflects their sufferings due to social victimization.

Shobha De's *Second Thoughts* throws light on the traditional marriage in Indian society in which woman has to suffer a lot. Maya’s silent cry for true companionship for herself always remains unheard. Her plight results in her isolation
and causes mental pain. The insensitive attitude of her husband, Ranjan towards her biological and emotional needs makes her marriage sterile. Maya had a keen desire to discover Bombay and pursue a career in textile designing. But her sense and sensibility are reduced to ashes by her fanciful, moody, suspicious, and calculating husband. Ranjan loathes anything she loves. He dampens her spirit by refusing her proposal to do a job:

A job? In Bombay? Maya, you don't know what you're talking about. Bombay is not Calcutta.... Bombay is like New York or London. Tough, Competitive. You have to be good... great.... Brilliant ... to get a job here... (39)

In order to discourage Maya from unnecessary movement, Ranjan always presents a horrible picture of Bombay. "Remember, this is Bombay. B-O-M-B-A-Y. You can't trust anybody. Nobody at all. Understand?" (41)

All these instances are enough to make Maya understand her husband's conservative outlook and his complete indifference to her desires. She begins to experience the utter loneliness of a stranger in suburban Bombay. An analysis of Shobha De's novels reveals that her women characters try to strike balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this trapeze act, they are further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them, when they face loneliness and lack of communication and communality and are finally brought to mental crisis when masculine and institutional pressures are added to exacerbate them further. Maya persistently endeavours at equality but her efforts arouse suspicion in Ranjan further straining their relationship. Maya seem to be losing
her identity every moment that she is in the company of her husband. She painfully realizes:

Now here we were, locked together in a relationship that didn’t satisfy either of us. He very obviously longed to be on his own, leading the life he had become so accustomed to us a student, and then as a promising bank executive living by himself. And I longed for the perfect romantic companion. (252)

It makes her find solace in extra marital relations with Nikhil. Their friendship goes to the extent of physical intimacy; Maya is left with a deep sense of guilt. She feels that she should have given second thoughts to her married life and not plunged into an extra-marital affair, regretfully she thinks: "Somebody should have told me that this was what being married means. It means giving up everything that you've known as a carefree young girl. And for what? May be I am confused." (192)

Thus she has often contradictory emotions to deal with. And this is quite typical of Shobha De’s women characters. They are often confused between good and evil deeds but they mostly choose the evil ones which reflect the dominance of negative traits in their character. They are in a way, weak characters, who fail to establish their identity in the world. They enjoy material success, a sense of complete freedom from authority but very soon they realize the triviality of their actions as they lead them nowhere.

We find that Shobha De has cast most of her women characters in the same mould. But Maya is slightly different from her predecessors. She is at least aware of her limitations imposed by marriage. She rejoices in the company of Nikhil for the time being but ultimately accepts her predicament with a smile. Shobha de’s women
are often torn between the two—domesticity and their urge for sexuality. And in order to get satisfaction, they do not hesitate in establishing illicit relationships with other men. There are some rebellious women, who reject men to seek solace in lesbianism. They at times, "do everything to man that he has done to them: misbehave, mistreat, use dirty words as man has always done, smoking cigarettes, drinking and treating with indifference."

Women's subjugation to men and their marginalization is not related to sexual behaviour only. The pattern of women's subordination seems to be all pervasive. Women are relegated to the secondary position in a way that in marriage they do not achieve their rightful place and keep on 'playing wife.' Their inner, private world somehow remains inaccessible to the men they have married. In traditional Indian middle class families women have to depend on men in financial matters also. This financial insecurity makes their condition pathetic. They remain submissive and subdued. The husband controls money and women have to demean themselves and seek husband's permission for their day to day expenses also. They experience humiliation when they are not allowed to spend money and use domestic items as freely and according to their will as their husbands do. Maya undergoes the same experience, "I didn't dare make long-distance calls without seeking Ranjan's permission" (67). Even Maya's mother expresses this aspect of women's dependence on men, "I have had to beg of him to sanction our train fares and give me a little extra for two nice sarees- one for you and one for me" (4). These women's dependence on man and their traditional thinking keep them suppressed and they seem to accept their lot without showing any resentment. Financial security is the basis for woman's emancipation. De expresses this view in clear terms that there can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self—sufficiency.
We can say that Shobha De has successfully depicted the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women in properly negotiating the conflicting situations emerging from the clash between conservatism and liberalization. The gender issue of male chauvinistic dominance, the non-acceptance of a liberated woman by the Indian society, the growing question of sexual, familial and individual dilemma has been dexterously highlighted by Shobha De in *Second Thoughts*. She 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. A woman in the Indian context survives the spiritual claustrophobia by surrendering her "will" to the prevalent social norms.

While discussing about urban woman Shobha De has presented very realistic views. As, women in this world lose out by being women. The social inculcation is such as to incline them towards the so-called natural vocation of women i.e. to be a wife and a mother. Subordination or acceptance for male authority, whether of father, husband or son, is a cherished Indian value sanctified by tradition. A woman can not escape from this social condition in which she is trapped by the patriarchal society. But with the emergence of a gender oriented fiction, classically idealized woman has transformed into a new woman, eager to discover her true self. Today's educated working women have acquired the long denied respect, esteem and also freedom. They certainly face certain problems arising out of their dual responsibilities. The extra-earning is accepted no doubt, but the change in life pattern is not welcomed so eagerly by other members of the family. The household responsibilities are still considered as female obligation. As a result, majority of working women suffer from adjustment problems. Shobha De says about working women's expectation from her husband:
I bring in as much money as he does. I work equally long hours. I hate it when he offers to 'help' me fix dinner. What does he mean by 'help'? It's such a presumptuous word. It indicates he has assumed making dinner is solely my responsibilities... and he is being kind enough to share some of it with me. Bullshit. We both have to feed ourselves. As far as I’m concerned he does his bit and I do mine. It’s a joint effort. No favours.” (Surviving Men, introduction: xvii)

Shobha De portrays that the contemporary urban Indian women understand the significance of power, the power to control and direct the male psyche as they have done till now. At the same time they are very well aware of the economic aspect of their power game. Thus she has stressed greater importance to the economic independence of her females. She states: “Yes we know money is power. The person who controls the purse strings plays grand puppeteer, if the wife is wealthier, she's the one who makes the husband beg for pocket-money” (Surviving Men, Introduction: xviii).

Shobha De further concentrates on the issue of marriage. As the old definition of marriage is completely changed and is replaced by a contract of convenience where there is no place for marital fidelity. It is not even considered essential by the modern women. They are involved with men physically but are not ready to abandon their freedom by getting married "You've dumped the guy. You're feeling right on the top of everything. Powerful. Strong. Free. Mainly free. That's the happy part of the story.” (Surviving Men 63) De rejects this attitude of women who have misunderstood the concept of women's liberation and advises them, “Isn’t it time we unlearn few guy things and started being women again” (Surviving Men 74).
Shobha De is very frank while expressing her observation about the way women view sex. In her books she makes two central arguments on this. The first is - after a point, "sex is seen as both a bore and a chore" (Surviving Men 117) - something to endure rather than enjoy. The second – sex is bait for a woman – to hold and keep a man, maybe for security in marriage or a few baubles. She brazens her views on this issue in the following quoted lines, “Sex is as effective as food – and women have always married the two: first – the great meal, then the Big ‘F’ ” and “Sex is an extremely potent weapon which needs to be handled with the utmost care.” (Surviving Men 238). While men are capable of seeing sex as a purely physical act, for woman it’s always a package. She concludes, most men don’t know this – they live in an area of complete ignorance and darkness.

The above lines from Shobha De give us a glimpse into the fictional world of Namita Gokhale as well. Gokhale’s first novel came a bit earlier than that of Shobha De and thus was the first novel in Indian English novel to create a sensation for its frank description of sex by a woman writer. No earlier woman novelist, not even Nayantara Sahgal who has been unapologetic about extramarital relationships in her fiction, has been so bold as to go into a frank description of sexual behaviour. In this regard Namita Gokhale and Shobha De started a new trend in Indian feminist literature. Both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale are primarily concerned with the world of the woman in Indian society to the exclusion of other political or social concerns. However, while Shobha De in her fictional works does not talk of anything else, Namita Gokhale in her novels does deal with some metaphysical issues like death and the supra-physical existence. The reason for this lies primarily in her personal experiences. She lost her husband in the prime of her life and had a close brush with death herself. Naturally, these traumatic experiences affected her life and
writing. That is also the reason why her second novel came after a gap of a decade, while Shobha De’s second novel followed the first shortly.

Like Shobha De, Namita Gokhale has also lived in big cities. But unlike De, Gokhale does not talk of the big cities only. In fact, she situated her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* in Delhi and Bombay, now Mumbai. And it is only in her latest novel, *Priya in Incredible Indyaa* that she has reverted to her metropolitan background, that too because her latest novel is a sequel of her first novel. Her second novel also has the background of Delhi but a different Delhi, not the one of power and modernity. The novels that followed these two are situated in the backgrounds of hill – two in the hills of Uttarakhand where Namita Gokhale was born and the background of the third she does not name. Nonetheless, her feminist concerns are very much present in all these novels, though their emphasis is not as vehement as in the first novel.

One thing is common between Shobha De and Namita Gokhale. They are neither oppressed nor awed by man’s world. They are both realists and do not try to romanticize the ugly facets of life. The narrator of Namita Gokhale’s first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* says,

I saw things as they were, not as they should have been or people tried to pretend they were. It was this faculty of truth that had haunted me for years, distorting the happy moments of my life, mocking love, happiness, security. (114)

However, the subtitle of the novel, “Dreams of Passion” puts a question mark on the claims of realism. A reader is forced to think whether the things described are really those that are happening in the lives of Indian women, even though very small
in number, or they are merely dreams Indian women would like to realize. Both the central characters in this novel – Priya, the narrator and Paro, the protagonist – are the portraits of upward moving women of India. Paro runs a step ahead of Priya. She is what Priya longs to be all her life. Priya’s upbringing shows the partial treatment that a patriarchal society gives to sons in comparison to daughters. Even mothers share this bias. Priya had lost her father in her childhood and this had made her mother more partial towards the only son in the family:

In fact, I barely existed for her. Family circumstances had more or less forced me to take up a secretarial course rather than complete college; all our family savings went into making my brother a doctor. As there was no prospect of our being able to shell out any dowry for me, my mother forbode a bleak spinsterhood. ‘Perhaps she will find some deaf-mute to marry her’, she would mutter with gloomy relish. And yet she was full of venom at my ‘fastness’; it was not in Raipur as it was in Bombay, ‘and even a deaf-mute would expect his wife to be respectable’. I was, of course, the only earning member of my family. (11)

It is this bias against a girl child that both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale have highlighted in their novels.

*Paro* is the portrait of two Indian women in search of their place in society. While Paro belongs to the upper middle class, Priya belongs to the lower middle class. So the struggle to rise in life and achieve a place of prominence in society is more difficult. When we see Paro for the first time she already has made a place for herself in society while Priya is working in B. R.’s company and dreaming of a future life
with him. It is Paro who frustrates her dream for the first time. She marries B. R. and thus becomes an object of jealousy for Priya. Priya had surrendered physically to B. R. because as she claims she was in love with him but, we suspect, also because she considered him a step towards her social uplift. Paro’s marriage with B. R. frustrates her ambitions. But she overcomes her frustration and with a new determination moves towards her future. Priya comes before us as an ambitious woman who is determined to overcome all handicaps that her birth in a lower middle class family has put before her. In this regard Paro is an inspiration for her.

Paro comes before Priya with her dazzling glamour on the occasion of the reception party thrown at her marriage. She at once gets a glimpse into a world she had never encountered:

She was wearing a silver tissue sari, and was positively glittering with diamonds. They were strewn like dewdrops over her - chokers, pendants, rings, bangles, sequins. Tall as she was, she was balancing on the highest stiletto heels I had ever seen in my life. Even her payals were encrusted with incredibly real-looking diamonds. Her lipstick was a pale silver, and silver eyeshadow gleaned over her hard eyes. ‘Hi, Daddyji’, she said throatily, planting a kiss smack on Rai Bahadur’s forehead – she had to bend over slightly to reach him. Her audacity and self-confidence took my breath away. This was not how brides behaved in my world. (13)

Paro becomes a role model for Priya. In that very scene the novelist suggests that it was Priya’s own determination to dominate the world around her and that her
parents, though they belonged to an upper middle class family, had no role in making Paro the confident woman that she is:

Her father, I knew, was a Brigadier (retd), and her mother too looked an average member of the upper middle class. Both had polite vacant smiles fixed uneasily to their faces, and they appeared in every way too mundane and ordinary to have bred so exotic a creature as the shimmering bride before them. (13)

Through a character like Paro Namita Gokhale has depicted a representative of the upcoming generation of Indian women who are asserting themselves in different ways. Such women are inspiring other women also. Priya, however, had no means of getting high in life. Jobs like that of a secretary could not take her very high in life. So she uses the traditional mode of the patriarchal society – marriage - to get high in life. The photograph of Suresh with a car in the background made up her decision to get married to him. Though Priya does try to liberate herself and comes out of her boring middle-class suburban existence, she can not reach the same level of emancipation as Paro. Both these woman use the same techniques- manipulating the opposite sex to achieve their ends. About her marriage Priya notes:

My marriage was a middle-class one, much as any other. We did not have many relatives, and so it was uneventful, even a little boring. My husband was a virgin and did not seem to notice that I was not. B. R. accepted my resignation with equanimity. They could not attend the wedding which was in May, as they were holidaying in Europe. (23)

But in this marriage she finds the means of getting high in life. Thus we see the flashes of a new woman in Priya also. Suresh was equally ambitious. He told her
about his ambitions, hopes and dreams. They had a two-bedroom flat in Delhi and they tried their best to give it a look of respectability. In this Priya supported her husband. They entertained people regularly and gradually this proved a means of forming contacts and getting cases for Suresh who was a lawyer.

This is a situation which we do not find in the novels of Shobha De. None of her woman characters collaborates with her husband to carve her own path of life. The photographs of Paro that Priya comes across in fashion magazines continue to inspire her to move on in life. Paro herself is a restless soul. She alone of Namita Gokhale’s women characters matches with the boldest of Shobha De’s characters. For her marriage is a bondage and she grows fed up with her husband in no time. So she keeps changing her husband. She may be attracted towards men sensually, but this also is a fact that none of the men she associates herself with is a social nonentity. Nonetheless, somehow she gives the impression that by allowing them in her life she is obliging them, and not vice versa which is a traditional situation in a patriarchal society like India. This assertion of the individuality of a woman is something we get a glimpse of in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal but there the assertion is not as bold as we find in the case of Paro. That is why the novelist says that she has gone even beyond feminism:

Women’s liberation isn’t so chic any more, it has become a little dated, even irrelevant, like Trade-unionism to Socialism, as Lenin would say. Fashionable Women aren’t liberated any more; it’s all morchas and placards and sweaty types shouting about dowry and bride-burning. Paro has done it all. She’s left a husband and a lover, she has a small son of ambiguous parentage. (28)
No earlier Indian English woman novelist has tried to look at feminism in this light.

Paro’s decision to leave B. R. also shows her independent spirit. Once she caught him in the bedroom with a girl and this changed the very course of her life. She tells Priya that she would pay him back in his own coin. Suresh helped her to sort out her affairs, but he was using her to further his contacts for making more clients as she is very resourceful. “she is a conversation piece at dinner parties, and it is considered daring and chic to know her”(28). She is able to carry on her affairs with different men in total defiance of social norms and she succeeds in holding her own. Paro is liberated from marriage and convention. She is presented as individualistic. She has the courage of her convictions. For Paro men are the means for the sake of her luxurious living. Even after separating from her husband she settles some property for her maintenance. When Priya states that she does live off B.R.’s divorce settlement and by selling off the jewellery he gives her and that she does not earn her living she replies calmly that society has rules and she makes it clear that she has no qualms living off B.R.’s money or property. This statement of Paro shows that inspite of not having independent income, she is not ready to accept subordination to men on the basis of economic superiority.

Priya also follows her footsteps and resumes her relationship with B. R. but when she is caught in that she is forced by her husband to leave his house. She goes to Bombay to live with his brother but in her case the pressure that a patriarchal society exerts on a woman is evident. She has finally to repent and come back to her husband. In the male dominated society Paro asserts her individuality and does everything Priya longs to do, but can not do as she is bogged down by antiquated traditions and customs. Paro knew the power she wielded on men and went ahead to dominate them.
One after another from the powerful circle fell victim to her charms. She tells Priya that she has cultivated her personality in such a manner that every man feels a sense of pride in serving her. This may be a feminist point of view but the way Paro tries to achieve it is not healthy. She, however, is not the representative of every progressive woman in modern India. She is unique. Thus Namita Gokhale seems to suggest that a woman like Paro cannot be a role model for every woman in Indian society. Here Namita Gokhale is different from Shobha De. We do not come across such a stand in Shobha De. Her female characters succeed in holding their own before the male-dominated society. Thus they are nearer Paro than Priya.

Namita Gokhale’s second novel, *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is quite a different novel from her first one. It presents a strange mixture of religion, superstition and tradition with love, sex and feminism. However, this again is a novel where women dominate the scene. Though Gudiya is the protagonist and narrator of the story, the most dominating character in it is her grandmother. It is through this character that the novelist shows the underlying strength of a woman. Both Gudiya’s mother and grandmother had been prostitutes. And so Gudiya’s father is unknown. Since her mother ran away with a Muslim beggar, she was left in the care of her grandmother whom she calls Ammi. The novel thus becomes the story of the grit and determination of a woman not only to survive in a hard and cruel world but also to succeed and gain strength in it by playing its own game. Gudiya’s statement best sums up Ammi’s character and strength -“She was not the one to shed tears” and she “never wasted her time on anger”(9).

Namita Gokhale shows the ingenuity of a woman to turn the tide in her favour through the encounter of Ammi with Sundar Pahalwan. She tackles the pahalwan who
rules the world of the pavement where Ammi sets up her jhuggi in Delhi by exploiting the superstitious fear that is an evitable part of the psyche of such people. When he comes to evict her from there and abuses her, she tells him that she is the widow of a Brahmin priest and the curse of a virtuous woman will ruin his life. A frightened Sundar Pahalwan is subdued. When he comes to collect his money after week, he finds Ammi surrounded by a host of devotees before the statue of goddess Durga and singing a bhajan. The one who had come to take money leaves the scene leaving money in the collection pot before the goddess. Ammi thus exploits the sentiments of the superstitious people not only to survive but to gain strength. As the priestess of the new shrine, Ammi is reincarnated. Devotees begin to throng her temple and donations start pouring. Gudiya is sent to a school, though her grandmother still believed a girl should learn cooking and household works and get married to a respectable man.

The world that Namita Gokhale depicts in this novel is the world of traditional values so far man-woman relationship is concerned. When Magoo, a young woman living there succumbs to the charm of Shambhu, the tea vendor of the locality, her husband, Saboo kills her with an axe. Then he kills Shambhu also. It is the class where extra-marital affair on the part of the woman is looked upon as a blot on the honour of the husband. The infidelity of a husband, if not accepted, is at least easily condoned, but in the case of a woman it invites the condemnation of the whole society. In such a case also often the blame falls squarely on woman only. This world is quite far from the world of Paro where such affairs are a routine affair. In fact, it is also quite different from the world that Shobha De has created in her fiction.

Once again a crisis comes before Ammi as she is implicated in the case but her supporters come to her rescue and so she is able to overcome that hurdle. Her
reputation as a spiritual person continues to grow. What she had started as a play gradually overtakes her whole persona. She begins to believe in God and takes to fasting four days a week and undertakes other such activities. Her personal beliefs apart, her skill in the management of the temple is excellent and she runs it like a well-managed commercial organization. Another woman who displays such skill in the novel is Phoolwati, the widow of Shambhu. She closes the tea shop and starts a shop at the gate of the temple where she sells articles used in the rituals by devotees in the temple. After the death of Ammi it is she who controls the temple and looks after Gudiya. Thus, though illiterate and belonging to the lower class of society she exhibits the traits of a new woman and sets to deconstruct the image of the helpless, dependent Indian woman. Gudiya, who falls a victim of a loveless marriage, also proves to be a survivor. In this novel Gokhale effects a paradigm – shift in the position of her women who are autonomous and do not depend for their survival, as Manu postulates, on their fathers, husbands or sons. They have enough strength to face life with all its ups and downs. Thus though dealing with a different background and theme this novel of Namita Gokhale is also a feminist work where the novelist displays the power of resilience and survival in Indian women.

It is in her next novel, A Himalaya Love Story that Namita Gokhale emerges as a different novelist from Shobha De or for that matter from other contemporary novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. All other novelists have confined the backgrounds of their novels to urban or at best semi-urban areas of India. They have neither the exposure nor the imaginative flight to take them to India of different geographical backgrounds. Anita Desai in a novel like Fire on the Mountain does take the reader to the background of the Himalayas but the central character in that novel is not from hills but is an elderly recluse who has chosen to live there. Anita Desai is not
familiar with the lives of the hill people, particularly that of the woman there. Shobha De has no exposure to this kind of life. Namita Gokhale who has spent her childhood in the hills of the Himalayas is thus able to depict a different India from that found in the novels of other women novelists. However, in this novel also though she takes up a different background to tell a love story, her feminist concerns are very much embedded in the novel. A Kumauni by birth, Gokhale had spent her early childhood in Nainital and so she is familiar with the tough life that people in the hills live. Here women bear in particular the brunt of the tough life as the hardy works of everyday life like fetching firewood and water are left to women. The novelist depicts it first through the mother of Parvati, the central character. Parvati’s father had died of tuberculosis when she was just one year old. Her mother was forced to lead a widow’s life who did not have any financial resource, except that provided by a step brother. So she was suffering from the twin burden of penury and widowhood, a combination which makes a woman quite vulnerable. But Parvati’s mother is a courageous woman who knows how to cope up with this patriarchal society:

    My mother had, I believe, been a beautiful and spirited girl, and even now, years of poverty and deprivation had not managed to breach her pride. She could tongue-lash anybody in Jeolikote who trod on her sensibilities, and her eyes were frequently aflash with anger as she confronted yet another dupe who had mistakenly dealt with her as a vulnerable widow. (5)

But in her treatment of her daughter she is not different from any traditional Indian woman who considers that women are born to be a housewife and so education is not
of much value to her. She also is believer in patriarchal code which prefers a son to a daughter:

It would be different if you were a boy’, she would say angrily, ‘then you could earn and provide for me in my old age. But all you are going to do is get married to some no-good, and take my gold champakali necklace off with you as dowry. It’s a double curse, to first be born a woman, then get straddled with another female to provide for’ (6)

This thought of Parvati’s mother stemmed from the fact that one day her daughter would marry a good for nothing man, and as was the culture of Kumaoni men, he too would shift all the burden of responsibility on her daughter. This shows how deep rooted the hurt in women is with regards of their destiny. They seem to have resigned themselves and submitted their destiny in the hands of tyrannical forces of society, who decide their fate for them. Though her resources were very limited Parvati’s mother bravely carried on. She started knitting sweaters to find some extra cash. Both Parvati and her mother even planned to keep bees as a commercial proposition. It is the bee keeping that gives Parvati the idea of the male bees which do not do anything except reproduction and leave all the labour of collecting honey to the female bees. She feels that Pahari men are like male bees that are always crowding around the local tea shops, playing cards or purposefully spitting tobacco. They are the drones that leave all the work to their women and are not ready to take any responsibility on their shoulders. Thus in the hills women suffer doubly under the male domination. They have to work both inside and outside their homes and yet they are dependent on their male partners.
Like all contemporary women novelists, Namita Gokhale is aware of the importance of economic considerations in the liberation of women. Even Parvati’s mother who grudges the expenses on her daughter’s education realizes that it could create economic independence for her as after completing her studies she could become a teacher. Her affair with the shop keeper below their house could have been born out of financial consideration though neither she nor the novelist goes into its genesis. In this regard both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale share the same vision, as, for that matter, do other novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur.

There is another constraint that society has put on women in rural or small town areas in India. They cannot marry on their own. It is the males of the family, the father or in his absence the guardian of the family and other elders, who decide whom the girl of the family will marry. The wish of the girl is not taken into consideration. Parvati in this novel also suffers from this. She wanted to marry Mukul but her guardian decides that she will marry Lalit. The reason for this lies in the conventions of society. Girls are supposed to marry within caste. Mukul was not suitable for her from this point of view while Lalit was. Thus the decision of a conventional society is imposed upon her and her life is ruined. Lalit turns out to be a gay and thus the possibility of the sexual satisfaction is also not there for her. She is forced by the demands of her body to make a physical contact with Lalit’s younger brother.

Here also Namita Gokhale proves to be a step ahead of other Indian English women novelists. No other novelist, including Shobha De has depicted a gay in her novels. So the character of Lalit is the first major gay character by a woman novelist. Earlier Namita Gokhale had introduced a gay husband in the life of Paro in her first
novel, but that character was not given much prominence. Shobha De has referred to lesbians and gays in most of her novels. Shobha De has given detail description of lesbian behaviour in her novel *Strange Obsession*. Both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale, however, do not go into a full portrait of the mental condition of a gay. It is only in a few scenes that underlines the situation. The scene where Mukul comes to visit Lalit and Parvati after their marriage is brilliant from the artistic point of view where just by a brief description the novelist makes the situation very clear:

Lalit, look at Mukul with hunger in his eyes. The mask of lust taut upon his ordinary face; the telltale twitch near his mouth made him appear both pathetic and obscene. I thought of those long-ago days in Nainital, when the two of them had attended upon me like pageboys and paid me homage. (36-37)

This is the nearest that Namita Gokhale goes in her description. Unlike the West, in India talking of gays and lesbians is still socially not acceptable. Generally a gay is indicated as a person not interested in woman. Namita Gokhale also does so when she makes Raju, Lalit's younger brother comment on that:

When Raju found me sleeping in the kitchen, surrounded by rats and vermin, he seemed not in the least surprised. “So that’s how the land lies, is it?” he grinned. ‘Is this a lover’s quarrel or has my respected brother’s hatred of the fair sex asserted itself?’

I blushed furiously, wondering how much he knew. (40)

Namita Gokhale, however, is not interested in the psychology of a gay. Her concern is the effect of the marriage of a gay with a woman and how a woman suffers in this case. Parvati’s frustration stems from the fact that her husband is a gay. The
situation in which a woman remains far from the conjugal bliss is also seen in Shobha De’s novels too. Maya the protagonists of Second Thoughts leads a submissive and subdued life, a life without husband’s love and the satisfaction which a married life provides. The reason behind this is Ranjan’s own failure in sexual relationships. Anjali in Socialite Evenings can not enjoy her marital life with her husband Kumar because he is homosexual and more interested in Murthy.

After the death of Lalit because of tuberculosis, Parvati becomes insane. The rest of the novel is a poignant description of how economic considerations play a major role in the kind of life a woman is forced to spend if she has no financial resources of her own. The relatives of Parvati take her out of the mental asylum where she has been put when it seems that she has inherited property.

The very title of the next novel of Namita Gokhale, The Book of Shadows denotes the theme of the novel. Situated in the background of a Himalayan town, the novel deals as much with the world of the living as with that of the dead. In the epigraph of the novel the novelist quotes Ovid, “My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms”. So obviously the novel does not describe feminist concerns. However, indicators of feminine, if not feminist sensibility crop up here and there in the novel. Rachita Tiwari’s sexual escapade with the husband of a close friend takes us to the familiar world of Namita Gokhale of Paro. Rachita, like other heroines of Gokhale, is also not repentant over it.

In her novels Gokhale’s protagonists mostly display the tendency for withdrawal from the real world but Shobha De’s women are quite opposite for they are worldly women with its wisdom and folly. One prominent feature of the writings of women novelists of the second half of the twentieth century has been the realistic
approach towards the needs of the body. They have deconstructed the myth foisted upon the psyche of women that body is something sacred and its urge for another body outside marriage is a sin which cannot be atoned. A patriarchal society like India never insisted upon a similar condition for men. For ages women accepted this male injunction unquestioningly. Now women have started questioning this myth, and women novelists have broken it in their stories and other literary creations. In *The Book of Shadows* we come across this assertion of the rights of a woman.

In all her novels, Gokhale delineates her male characters not in favourable light. They are weak characters for without any strong reason they hang themselves bidding good bye to this cruel world and stop their life journey very early. They do not show courage to face the life as it is. Females are stronger than male for they have enough cause for suicide but they choose to face the world with their disfigured face and finally prove themselves as survivor.

In her novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* Namita Gokhale has proved herself a different kind of novelist. This novel is different not only from the novels of Shobha De but also from the other novels that Namita Gokhale herself has written. It presents a unique combination of history, fantasy, romance and also feminism. The background of the novel itself presents a landscape combined of hill, forest, village and finally the ancient city, Kashi. The theme of the novel is the longing of a woman to be free of all kinds of fetters of society, of convention, of religion and even of fidelity to realize her insatiable thirst to know and see the world. Since ages this has been the privilege of a man only. In the novel Namita Gokhale presents this fact through the brother of Shakuntala who turns a yogi in search of knowledge and liberation and wanders all over the country. He was venerated by all, but Shakuntala
knew that the society would not allow her this freedom. Being a woman she should be mere man’s shadow. Berger also said:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself…. She has to survey everything he is and everything she does…. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another…. Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at…. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (46-47)

Like in some other novels of Namita Gokhale, the heroine of the novel, Shakuntala is also a fatherless daughter. Her father died when she was five years old and so she was brought up by her mother. As she recalls later her mother led a very hard life to rear her two children – Shakuntala and her brother, Govind who later became Gureswar, the yogi. Shakuntala resented since her childhood the male-dominated society’s bias towards the male child which was shared by the women of society also. She recollects – “My mother never fatigued of telling me not to fancy myself a scholar, as the scriptures were forbidden to women” (11) Like other mothers, her mother also wanted to provide every opportunity of rising in life to her son: “She worried incessantly only about her son, how she would oversee his education and ensure that he got the opportunities he deserved.” (11) Women in the old days were not allowed access to education. When her brother was being initiated into education, Shakuntala was not even allowed to hear the mantra:
The priests began a sonorous recitation of the Gayatri mantra, after whispering it in my brother’s ear. Mother plugged up my ears with flaxen antariya. ‘You can’t listen to the mantra,’ she told me, ‘or else.’

‘Or else what?’ I challenged.

‘Or else you’ll grow a moustache and no one will marry you.’ (19)

The prejudices against women in those days were immense. Through Shakuntala Namita Gokhale comments on the social codes: “An unmarried girl did not merit a caste or a varna. Born to Brahmin parents, only upon marriage could I rise to the gotra of my husband’s caste”.(18)

Through the character of Shakuntala Namita Gokhale asserts a woman’s right to knowledge, experience, love and life. It is this thirst that forces Shakuntala to leave her husband and her comfortable home behind and run away with a Greek to the city of Kashi. She revels not only in her sexuality but also in her exposure to different worlds that she encounters in her journey. The creation of a character like Shakuntala is Namita Gokhale’s assertion of a woman’s right to her life and destiny. In this regard there is a basic similarity in the characters of Paro and Shakuntala. Both are very courageous women who believe that life’s rules can be changed to suit one’s dreams.

In her latest novel, Priya: In Incredible India Namita Gokhale returns to the world of her first novel. This is a sequel to Paro: Dreams of Passion. Thus Namita Gokhale becomes the first Indian English novelist, both male and female, to do so. In her dedication to the novel, she writes:

To JE for challenging me to return to the territory of my first novel

And to Paro, for remaining so triumphantly alive after all those years.
The image of Paro hovers throughout the novel but never intrudes into the plot. In her first novel, Paro was the central character and Priya the narrator of the story. In this novel Priya is both the narrator and the central character of the novel. In the first novel, Priya, though in the shadow of Paro, was trying to make a place of her own in her life. So in this sense she was an active character. Here, as the wife of a Central Minister, she remains a passive character, without any ambition or drive. Namita Gokhale has presented her in this novel as a housewife, dedicated to the comforts and care of her husband, Suresh and her two sons, Luv and Kush who are twins. In a scene, Luv bursts into tears, seeking solace from his mother, and Priya observes:

‘Oh Maa, I need you’. Indian mothers sacrifice their entire lives, in films and in real life, only in the hope of someday hearing these precise words. I concealed my joy and gratification behind a mask of motherly concern. ‘No beta, no tears, men don’t cry! I exclaimed, stroking the hair I had once brushed and combed and oiled. (39)

The novel is replete with scenes like these. It does not mean that Namita Gokhale has lost her feminist passions. She still depicts the physical need of Priya when she enjoys sex with her old love, B. R. in a hotel. In the character of a young woman, Paromita she describes the thoughts and passions of the new generation of women in contemporary India.

All the main characters in the novels of Namita Gokhale do not have healthy and happy childhood. This happens because of the absence of the influence of a male member in the family, as most of them lost their fathers early. Their mothers had to struggle hard for sustenance and they had strained relations with their mothers. Due to
the meager economic resources and neglect faced by the protagonists in their lives the course of their worldly journey was set, leading them to miseries and insecurities. This is the frame of Gokhale’s novels which set the basic difference between the novels of Shobha De and Namita Gokhale. From their childhood De’s protagonists behold fathers crushing their sense of individuality and their mothers enacting the role of a devoted wife and a sacrificing mother. Only in *Starry Nights* Aasha Rani shares the similar fate of Namita Gokhale’s heroines.

Though contemporaries, Namita Gokhale and Shobha De are at times different in the portrayal of female characters and their attitude to marriage, sex and love. While Gokhale’s female characters desperately struggle to make their marriages a success, however unfulfilling they may be, De’s heroines opt out of marriage. Again Gokhale has not given such sexual freedom to her women as Shobha De. De’s women are permissive and often change their bed partners. In Gokhale’s novels sex is presented in a restricted way or in other words out of love Gokhale’s heroines do sex not out of hunger as in De’s. Like Priya attaches with B.R. sexually out of her love and Gudiya does sex before marriage after falling in love with Kalki. But finally both Shobha De and Namita Gokhale present the women who are not committed to the values of society as is expected from them, rather their commitment is solely for themselves. They mastered the art of manipulating the existing system for their benefit.

Thus a comparative study of these two remarkable Indian English women novelists of today, Shobha De and Namita Gokhale, reveals how the women novelists are trying to express the voice of Indian woman in contemporary India. Although the secret of happiness considered in the rumble of life is the organized family life. But
on closer scrutiny we realize that in most cases women have been at the receiving end in the scheme of things and this resentment is working within them for quite sometime. This social scenario of today has compelled the women writers to explore the possibilities of female existence beyond the simplistically dualistic conflict of good and evil. They have emphasized the doctrine of women’s empowerment through their works that highlight the ideological and physical struggle of women for reclaiming and redefining the women’s self. Women in India, much like women in the Western world, are asserting their right to live life on their own terms.
Works Cited


