Chapter- III

SHOBHA DE: THE NEW WOMAN
Shobha De has had diverse career roles ranging from model to columnist. All her published novels have been well received. Her novels, racy and raunchy in style and content are trashed by serious critiques, but the numbers they sell make her one of the most widely read English novelist in India. Currently her writing is marked by a literary transition from writing projects based on a rather flashy elite society with emphasis on its extra marital affairs to a more mature and rather philosophical works on life and the myriad of twists and turns in relationships. De claims to be a “Pioneer” in the field of “Popular Fiction” writing. She also claims to be among the first to explore the world of the urban woman in India.

Despite the disparaging critiques of her detractors, her claim for a pioneering position in the realm of popular fiction and in delineation of the urban woman’s socio-psychological existence has an authenticity. Moreover, popular fiction has attained an important status in the recent global context. Because popular culture, and, popular fiction especially initiate debates and discourses that constitute the crux of intellectual fictional and non-fictional production.

Through her novels and essays De has tried to shatter patriarchal hegemony to bring out the marginalization of women in the Indian society, as Alice Jardine puts it:

The putting into discourse of ‘woman’ as that process diagnosed---is intrinsic to modernity, indeed the valorization of the feminine, woman,
and her obligatory that is historical, connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary models of thinking, writing and speaking.²

De’s fiction is a revolt against society and social norms which are meant for woman’s subjugation. She has advocated rebellion sort of women rarely to revolt against established social taboos which tie her to behave as passive one and always be subjugated by man’s authority. De has portrayed women characters as an alter ego of man. She seems to favor the views of Betty Friedan:

We now know that the same range of potential abilities exists for women as for men. Women as well as men can only find their identity in work that uses their full capacities. A woman cannot find her identity through others – her husband, her children. She cannot find it in the dull routine of housework.³

In a domestic and social setup, a woman craving for liberty needs to be independent economically. This independent economic status will enable her to stand erect and look straight at the adversities, and, affirm her status and identity. A self-sufficient woman can defend herself against domestic slavery and male supremacy. De writes:

There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or a free spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else. ⁴
De’s fictional world marks the overwhelming presence of women. In almost all of her novels, a woman is the protagonist. The women’s behavior, their thoughts and their responses in different situations forms the main concern of De’s fictional discourses. In her novel we come across a variety of women from extremely modern, assertive, young and liberated to the traditional Indian housewives. Her focus on modern women’s life and their immediate problems makes the presence of feminist perspective an essential aspect of her fiction. In spite of the mocking tone, casual attitude and depersonalized nature of her fiction, De does not seem to be indifferent to women’s problems. Her concern for women’s sufferings and their marginalization can be ascertained from the way she has arranged and structured her fictional discourses. She does not proclaim to be a feminist. Yet she is sensitive enough to expose different ways of women’s subjugation in a male dominated world. The depiction of women’s problems in her fiction is considered to be one of the major factors of De’s popularity as a writer. However, the presentation of modern, rich, educated and assertive women marks a difference from traditional women’s problems.

The women in De’s fictional world belong to the world of showbiz, opulence and romance. Their problems and concerns are different from those of the ordinary traditional middle class women. Being educated and wealthy they have an easy access to new ways of life leading to women’s independence. De has tried her best to
expose the moral breakdown of modern society in which a helpless
and forsaken woman longs for fulfillment and wants to fly in the sky
unfettered. So her women go through the upheavals of life on
physical and emotional levels finally to achieve some measure of
freedom from social bondage.

Shobha De herself would consider the treatment of women’s
problems as the most significant contribution made by her work. She
once said:

I write with great deal of empathy towards
women without waving the feminist flag, I feel
very strongly about women’s situation. 5

Shobha De voices against the malist culture and strongly detects
the marginalization of women. She does not believe in describing her
women characters as love slaves or bitches or mere helpmates at home.
In her novels she presumably mirrors her own feminist and sexist
mindset. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the
good old image of women ‘as an appendage’ or ‘an auxiliary’. De tries
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 with
individual opinions about their lives. These characters are known as the
“New women” in later twentieth century fiction. Her women may or
may not be flappers yet they are much more physical and athletic than their mothers have been.

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 feminity, 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. We know this image might be admired but not easily accepted by Indian males. Shobha De however, shapes her women characters in the above frame to bring out the marginalization of women in Indian society and a kind of protest against the conventional code of conduct for them. De’s women appear to be rebellious modern Indian women who challenge the orthodoxy of sexual and social taboos. They are certainly different from the sexually ignorant Indian women as described by Khushwant Singh and other Indian writers. De’s female protagonists are not submissive but are more remarkable when measured against men. They are not guilty about their affairs and attitudes. Mostly the men are subdued and threatened by the self-assured and self-reliant females. Her women revolt against the traditional image of Indian woman in words and deeds. In a sense De is a fore runner of the emerging Indian woman with her liberated womanhood. De quotes:
In India we treat our women strangely. We either worship them, or we burn them. If that sounds like an extreme sentence so is our peculiar attitude. The images of Durga were found in some of the houses, where daughter-in-law was sent up in flames for not having brought along a handsome dowry. Such contradictions co-exist so naturally that they go unnoticed especially by the men.\(^6\)

De’s women protagonists experience the difference of being born as female right from the childhood and those experiences remain rooted in their consciousness throughout life. In most of the cases they grow upon indifferences and neglect of their father. Their emotion to love and to be loved remains ill responded, in turn leaving them unconnected, alone and alienated. In a sense their insistent quest for self-identification, self-liberation and self-celebration, starts from childhood itself. Despite facing the subordination and marginalization these women try to actualize themselves and attain their identity, their real self.

De also resents the notion that due to the procreational potential of women, they are discriminated. She presents her heroines as transgressor and a threat to the social order. Her protagonists are not subject to male ostracism. They adapt themselves to all kinds of situations in order to better respond to their daily needs and liberate themselves from all constraints even if they have to pay the price of their actions. They debunk and defy the
male hypocrisy and their supposed authority casting aside their submissiveness. They go to the extremities like violently radical, defiantly uncompromising, overly promiscuous and even openly malicious. They reveal in an uninhibited universe where the male is pushed into a corner and forced to live a subdued existence. These women’s protest is the outcome of their age old marginalization. The noted eco-feminist Karen J. Warren argues:

Patriarchal conceptual framework is an oppressive framework which functions to explain, justify and maintain the subordination of women by men.  

De’s preoccupation with different aspects of woman’s life makes her portray a variety of women from extremely modern and liberated to the traditional, subjugated and marginalized. The variety of women depicted in De’s novels bring out different ways in which these women are subjected to male hegemony and informs the types of protests registered by these women against patriarchal male domination. An interesting feature of De’s portrayal of these women is the presence of sub groups of women, within the main group; they may be highly liberated, oppressive, dominating. They include the modern and the traditional Indian middleclass women who are totally unaware of their marginalization and subordinate position in patriarchy and ones who express silent protest in spite of their awareness about being oppressed. All the different types of women that appear in De’s fiction feel the sting of male cruelty and a
deliberately planned scheme of the social institutions of marriage and family to treat them as the other. This highlights the all-pervasive nature of male tyranny in the prevailing social system. De has very cleverly projected the glamorous images of the attractive, apparently independent and highly professional women trying to dominate the power structures. But the outward glory and glitter of the life these women seem to enjoy is no doubt marked by inherent frustration and disgust as an outcome of their deviant behavior. The traditional Indian women in spite of their feeling desperately suffocated and made invisible, try to adjust in the binary paradigm prescribed by male dominated society.

*Socialite Evenings*, De’s maiden novel depicts the journey of Kaurna, the central protagonist from an ordinary middle class girl to a socialite. Karuna, a prominent Bombay socialite escapes the nightmares of a broken marriage, failed relationships and mentally disturbed sister. The first person narrative reveals the various experiences of Karuna’s life. The novel revolves around Karuna who protests against the male assigned roles and identities and proves herself a self-sufficient woman at the end. The novel describes how Karuna has to live like an alien in her husband’s house.

Karuna is the youngest of the three daughters of a middleclass family. Born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote town in Maharashtra, she shows all signs of rebellion by defying the patriarchal set up, throughout her life. She becomes an eager aspirant of Mumbai high
society soon after her middle class bureaucrat father gets posted in the glittering city, Mumbai. There she meets Anjali, a prominent socialite in the company of whom her whole world changes and she starts dreaming of a career in films. Thus born in a middle class family which is governed by the virtues of ‘discipline and denial’, Karuna is introduced to the world of luxury which is considered as a dirty world in her family. Her resentment towards the tyranny of middleclass morality grows stronger day by day producing anxiety which is responsible for her ideas of rebellion against the middle class virtues.

At home she refuses to cower before elders, to serve tea for the guests and likes whistling in the bathroom. At school she shows her resentment by wearing her sash hipster style; not confronting to the established social lines, is Karuna’s way of revolting against the social order which she considers, denies her individual freedom and refuses to accept her as a living human being with emotions, feelings, and expectations. Her dissatisfaction with the state and unfair social rules manifests itself in her facet rebellion. She feels happy with a sense of accomplishment when she finds someone doing the things in her own way. Her attraction for Anjali, Ritu and their likes springs from her idea of liberated women. As she grows in age there develops in her the emotional urge to identify with the outside world, the modern crowd, the bewitching and fascinating world of affluent girls who had everything. Her slap dash entry into all that is modern lands her in the lewd and
clandestine world of modeling with her secret assignment as a Terkosa girl.

Both Karuna and Anjali have bad memories of cruelty and unkindness of their fathers. Karuna’s father was a caring parent in his own personal way. The overall atmosphere of the house was devoid of mutual trust; even mother did not have autonomy in family matters:

My own father was an autocrat and disciplinarian. He believed it was not ‘manly’ to show his feeling. ‘You are far too soft with the children! He’d admonish mother ‘If you aren’t strict with them, they’ll take full advantage of you’. We never sat in fathers lap-----In fact, we rarely addressed him directly – it was always through mother, perhaps this was why I also had a thing about older men, particularly those with kind eyes and soft hands. 8

Thus, marginalization is imbibed in the female psyche since childhood. Men and women are assigned a cultural code of conduct in which a female is taught to be marginal. Women in this world lose out by being women. The social inclination is such as to incline towards the so called natural vocation of women i.e. to be a wife and a mother. Subordination or acceptance of male authority whether of father, husband or son, is a cherished Indian value sanctified by tradition. Their choices and potentials are so thwarted by the societies of which they are the integral part.
The novel also gives us the picture of marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Karuna’s marriage is failure since it is loveless, joyless and meaningless. Her aversion to her own ordinariness is manifested in her rejection of everything that is ordinary and middle class. She craves the life of exotic high society and this is the reason that – ‘I got married in a mad rush to the first acceptable man’.\(^9\)

She feels that marriage is the only way to get rid of her middle class family restrictions. Karuna’s marriage is a failure since it is loveless, joyless and bridgeless. There is no understanding between the husband and wife. She feels that she had married “the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time.” Her husband was just the average Indian husband, “unexciting, uninspiring, and untutored. He was not made for introspection.” Karuna’s husband is not at all bothered about her sentiments and desires. He is busy with his own rise in the corporate world. She detests the stand-offish and callous attitude of the husband who often kept himself 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 says:

We were reduced to being marginal people.
Everything that mattered to us was trivialized.

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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 their. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our head and four square meals a day.\(^\text{10}\)

Karuna summed up the average Indian woman’s married life as “an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left” and “marriage is like skin allergy, an irritant”. She also thinks in the words of Simone De Beauvoir:

Marriage subjugates and enslaves women. It leads her to aimless day, indefinitely repeated life that slips away genesis towards death without questioning its purpose.\(^\text{11}\)

But Karuna boldly and defiantly encounters her marriage for she realizes marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to and she gets used to this stereotyped social institution in course of time.

Subaltern attitude of women finds expression in the deletion from their mind of all thoughts of feminine liberty and equality. This is exemplified in the life of Karuna who was deliberately humiliated by her husband due to his repeated nagging that she married him for money. And what of the wife? She was feeling humiliated and demoralized enough to actually half believe what he was saying. The pitiable plight of such a woman as a housewife can be revealed by the following quote:
He brainwashes me constantly. I am made to feel obliged and in debt. It’s awful, but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house has become a battled ground. I don’t know what to do – either way I’m stuck.  

The subordination of women as housewives stems from a castration panic on the part of the husband. The Indian male is presented by De as a person ‘terribly threatened by self-sufficient women’. He is inadequate and incomplete as a husband since he lacks the traits of an ideal husband. Fear of his loss of domination and control over the self-affirming wife makes him resort to several defense mechanism. It is the male who can shout, hurt, abuse, bully, reproach, criticize and it is the woman who has to listen, tolerate and remain passive. Another strategy is his male chauvinism and power assertion ventilation in bullying and committing atrocities upon his wife. But his stupid self-conceit and ego restricts a free exchange of views among sexes. Karuna inquisitively wonders:

---how could we communicate anything at all to men who perpetually sat reading pages of The Times of India while concentrated picking their noses?  

Karuna learns from Ritu, whom she chances upon, at finance director’s party that men like dogs could be conditioned through reward and punishment. She was fed up with her husband’s compulsive socializing, his horrible safari suits and the gum he
constantly chewed. Karuna’s husband does not come up to her expectations. She can hardly expect him to distinguish love from sex, considering the patterns which his life follows. He is not capable of recognizing the elements of emotion in married life. For him marriage seems to be a social arrangement in which he is expected to provide her food, clothes and shelter and she will allow him sex on demand. Bogged down by the boredom prevailing in her marriage, she inclines to her books and her own fantasies:

Given my disappointing husband I’d created a liberated woman, person for myself – passively and secretly of course I thrilled to the exploits of Gloria Steinem and Geramine Greer read Fear of Flying to bits. Women it seemed for the first time could have control over their lives. The scene was changing even in Bombay. Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single. It was not such a big deal. 14

Shobha De’s novels present various aspects of changing Indian society in vivid details. Her primary focus is on the status of woman in a family and in the society by implication. In her narratives ‘boredom’ is the operative word. It is the feeling of boredom that prompts these modern women to break free from the tyranny of their environments and explore new possibilities by accepting the complete responsibility of the consequences. Locked up in fragile and futile marital knot, Karuna was leading a life of emotional frigidity. There was no meaningful communication between the
partners. No smiles and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, no queries and questions but silence and only silence. Karuna admits that it was not that she never tried, but there was no question that her husband and she inhibited different planets. But despite these emotional voids in her conjugal life, Karuna toed the track of an ideal housewife conforming to the demands of tradition. She did not protest but dutifully obeyed her husband. The house was kept in order; everything was well trimmed, clean and tidy.

But in order to satisfy her emotional need, Karuna gets involved with Krish. The sympathetic and caring nature of Krish lifted her spirits, making her feel life herself again. The affair seemed inevitable and was the best thing that could have happened to her. Three years long “torrid affair” and her “raging passion for Krish” forced her to consider the possibilities of walking out of her current marriage and marry Krish. She even goes on a fun trip with him to London and Venice in a state of desperation. She feels accepted and loved regardless of what she says or does in the company of Krish. But during the trip to Venice she finds Krish a shallow, exploitative, utterly ordinary, no he was even less than that, human being. This experience was enough for her to emerge saner and sober. Karuna’s husband is a compromising and forgiving type of person, who forgives her for her affair with Krish:

I’ve thought over the whole thing carefully. I would’ve thrown you right now, but I’m
prepared to give you one more chance. I’m not a mean man. You’ve been a good wife – I’m prepared to cancel this one black mark on your performance record and start with a clean slate. But you have to swear you will never see or keep in touch with that man again. ---You have sinned but I must be generous and forgive you.15

Karuna calls this act of forgiveness on the part of her husband as an act of male ego, his assertion of superiority. What right has he to say that he is 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? He is unable to look deep the biological need of Karuna. Her affair with Krish was her attempt to attend wholeness, as without a man, a woman is a partial self. Such an involvement on the part of Karuna may also be a strategic escape from the claustrophobic and cloistered milieu of her marital life where they lived as two separate islands. Karuna says that he never cared to understand her as woman. Her pregnancy, abortion, and “hysterectomy” to get rid of complications from the fibroids followed by divorce leave her on her own. Her refusal to accept any help or charity and her decision to find her own means reflect her self-respect. Her hysterectomy or removal of her womb symbolizes her liberation from traditional sex role assigned to a woman by the society. She feels herself well equipped to stand tall in a ruthless world without any scruple.
Karuna, in *Socialite Evenings* plays different roles at different times to quench her emotional or psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor, writer and a paramour. She rejects the hierarchisation of male values where the female factor is reduced to a negative and almost nullified. Her statements express her desire for affirmation of her feminine self. It is in fact a search on her part for the genuine female self in a male centered phallocentric world. Hence Karuna questions to 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 as any man, I have a roof over my head. I do not really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I’m not answerable to anyone ---I can’t make any ‘sacrifices’--- not now.  

Her new understanding brings her realization of her responsibilities and confidence to face life boldly, to take care of her parents:

I felt like a responsible caring daughter for the first time in my life. They needed me. And I needed them. We had arrived at a happy situation. They didn’t have a son to look after them in their old age. They had the enormous burden of an invalid daughter to cope up---How could I abandon them at this point?  

Karuna takes up some odd jobs for survival and ends by taking up a lucrative job of freelance Ad-writer with the help of Anjali, her friend. She also refuses the marriage proposal of Girish, the art film maker. She
realizes that she cannot be happy with Girish. In spite of their common interests, in fact she cannot be happy with any man who deprives her of present state of independence. She realizes:

I suppose my real concern were different. It wasn’t money or success. I was looking forward to in my life at that point; it was the freedom to do what I wanted. My part time job gave me that. \(^\text{18}\)

She progresses a lot with her hard work and excels in the job of ad-script writing and also bags the award as the copywriter of the year. She also experiences the gender discrimination during her single status as:

At parties or other functions, if I didn’t have an escort, men would zoom in hungrily – not because they found me irresistible – oh no – but because they imagined I was available. \(^\text{19}\)

At the end she confirms the idea of her state of living that Single is good for her. As Ranbir Roy, a journalist working for Washington Times, who even offers her to work as his assistant, describes her as “Disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient”. Karuna with all her attempts at ego assertion refuses subscription to stereotypes, to succumb to the hegemony of malist culture. A woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position. Thus, the subordination of women in a malist culture is symptomatic of hierarchy of socio- moral values between sexes. Another female
character of importance in the novel is Anjali, the woman who leaves an everlasting influence on Karuna. Anjali symbolizes “The new woman” in true sense as belonging to the traditional Gujarati household; she escapes her conservative middleclass environment by joining Air India as Airhostess. She met Abe (Abha Tyabjee) “an experienced rake with a wild reputation”. On one of the flights and by the time they have landed in London they had decided to get married. She herself confesses to Karuna:

I have lost all my girlfriends to Abe. The minute he meets them, he starts his seduction plans. It does not take very long one lunch, two drinks and boom – they’re in bed. I don’t want to lose you.  

Anjali also has wild sexual encounters with Belgian photographer, Karan who is approximately her daughter’s age, an income tax officer. Finally she renounces her marriage to Abe and marries Kumar Bhandari, a rich businessman, twice divorced and a homosexual who fulfills his lust with a young boy Murtty. Anjali though likes being married, her concept holds a totally different meaning. She knew that men feel threatened by self-sufficient women and like ‘dependent dolls’ and so to use men she should behave like weak and dependent woman. Finding no satisfaction in marriage she opts for a divorce. Ritu is a shallow, vibrant, buoyant woman. She adopts a practical approach to deal with her situation. Notwithstanding lack of drive and general adventurousness of her
husband she makes her life colorful by training her husband to revel in her glamour and sex appeal. She does not sulk and curse her fate on the contrary she revels in his manliness. Karuna’s younger sister was sexually assaulted in Nagpur when she was 8 years old, which leads to her nervous breakdown. Ritu, previously involved in gross absurdities of the modern high society, also gets disillusioned. After her showdown with Gul, a don and all passions spent, she comes to understand her self-worth. She decides to settle down in a small village near Mussoorie and enjoy nature. Anjali also gets disillusioned with the demands of flesh and finds peace in Lord Krishna. She undergoes a complete transformation of self by forsaking sexual pleasure in favor of spirituality and religion.

Thus, *Socialite Evenings* depicts the picture of city women who are not ready to be marginalized by their male counterparts. The superimposition of socio moral values was the strategy followed by the males to keep them at subordinate positions. But these women discard such phallocentric patterns.

Set against the background of film industry and the people in show business the second novel of Shobha De *Starry Nights* exposes the gender bias, subordination of women, male violence and the social taboos on a woman which she herself unknowingly inflicts upon herself due to the prevalent social norms. As a result she leads an unhappy life as she gets trapped within the set moral codes and social norms of the society meant only for women. De through her
women characters like AashaRani, Amma, Malini, Rita has been able to portray a very vivid picture of the marginalization of women prevalent in the today’s society. De realistically articulates the experiences of the women characters as manifestation of oppression in chauvinistic society. They suffer in their lives at the hands of men in one way or the other.

*Starry Nights* emphatically purports the view that even in modern times with all socio political as well as economic achievements, the graph of woman exploitation is shockingly rising. Women sometimes owing to the compelling situation of their life are pushed into the net by their protectors while at other times their soaring ambition and will to assert their freedom takes them into the tunnels of unimaginable sufferings.

The tinsel world offers the most dismal picture of women’s exploitation is the emerging pattern in Shobha De’s *Starry Nights*. De has depicted the sufferings of Geetha Devi, Aasha Rani and Sudha with marvelous realism. The novelist decodes their feelings and emotional traumas in different ways from various perspectives. All these women struggle for their ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the apple cart of patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny for living for themselves. As De’s women don’t believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success.
Struggling hard with hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tear filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge the society to turn the tide of their favor. Brimming with hope and zeal, they lay their hands on hope in starry nights of their life. Their crusade against slavery, oppression and exploitation is alarming. With powerful strokes of her narrative technique, De suggests 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.

Aasha Rani, the protagonist of *Starry Night* is a suffering soul since her childhood. The very birth of Aasha Rani was a bitter agony. She can recall vividly that- ‘She was nothing but an unwanted bastard child for everyone to exploit’. 21

In her childhood she suffered due to bitter relationship of her parents. Her selfish and heartless father, a renowned film producer of Madras, left her mother in the jaws of hardships. She hates her father so much that she does not want to see him when he is ill. In fact she lacks the accommodating feeling for him because the painful memories of her lost childhood rush to her mind off and on:
Why should I care? Did he care us when we were starving? Did he come to our help when Amma had to go around begging for work? I have no feeling for him. My father died long ago.  

In her childhood, deprived of parental love, protection, closeness and emotional security, Aasha Rani had to face starvation and poverty owing to the lack of fatherly protection. She underwent traumatic experiences at the hands of her uncle. Her childhood plagued by utter poverty, deprived of childhood games and dolls explains her fetish for toys. She has a “thinly disguised hatred for men” which has probably developed because of her father’s desertion of them. She is unable to forget how he mistreated her mother and ruined her childhood. Her feelings of hatred for Appa are so overwhelming that Appa becomes the symbol of male domination. Aasha Rani was most mercilessly used by her mother, who instead of acting as her savior further pushed her into the hell of Porno films to support her family. Throwing all moral values to the wind, Amma forced Aasha Rani to perform in blue films against her will. The girl, who did not want to kill her conscience to break the barriers of the morality, was forcibly made money making machine in her youth as she painfully recalls:

But Amma had chosen that very day to steer her family from rags to riches cashing in on the only solid asset, she had in the world. The forty inch bust of her fifteen years old daughter.
Like a caged bird she is forced to perform in Porno session. If ever she resisted, her mother cruelly struck her. Before Porno sessions she helplessly cries, protests and repeatedly requests Amma to save her life. Those moments still stand afresh in her memory:

Amma please don’t I am so scared that horrible man. How can I take clothes in front of all these strangers? Amma had released her pincer like grip on Aasha Rani’s arm and said patiently. Think of it like going to the doctor’s---These people are the same---I mean, it is all acting. You just pretend and follow the director’s order. Close your eyes and think of other things. Think of your poor sister and your Amma struggling to make you a big star. Do you know Sudha has not paid her fees? ---we need a pressure cooker, come on, there is a sweet girl.  

Ironically, Aasha Rani is first exploited by her own greedy mother and this exploitation leads to further exploitation. Filmy Duniya extracts the price from Aasha Rani to make her a top film star. Big celebrities like Kishanbhai, assistant producer and small time distributor, Seth Amirchand, the Don of Bollywood, Jojo film producer and superstars Akshay and Abhijit, exploit Aasha Rani physically as well as mentally. De writes:

The industry was full of sex starved men who had chidiyas like Aasha Rani for breakfast.

Kishanbhai baptized her from Viji to Aasha Rani. He introduces her to the filmy world. He uses her body and sends her to various people
to get a role in films. She understands her situation soon and resolves to make the best of it. Once she warns Kishanbhai:

All of you are just the same but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all – beat you at your own game. 26

Aasha Rani’s conviction and struggle unveils the sexual politics in the society. She is not antagonistic towards social laws but only antagonistic towards the attitude which considers women as a ‘weaker sex.’ Aasha Rani experiences the sordid depths of relations and ugly heights of lust and greed. She helplessly compromises with her exploiters but understands them deeply. She snubs Kishanbhai:

You financed and produced my first film Kishanbhai, but you extracted payment from my body, you call me a prostitute but you forget that you were my first pimp so don’t throw garbage on me. I owe you nothing. 27

No doubt Bollywood casts a spell on Aasha Rani and she is so bedazzled by its glamour that she wanted to become a big star, but in her own way, on her own terms, not in this manner. Aasha Rani experiences the greed of her mother when she offers her for sex to a Sindhi Financer Vishnu M.D. through Kishanbhai despite the fact that she was dying to eat and get home to bed. After the initial nervousness she accepts the situation. This encounter makes her fearless and sex becomes mechanical activity for her. She perceived it with detachment. It even does not matter to her with whom she is
involved in sexual activity. For her every male is just a body. She ceases to react as the activity is not for the reciprocation of feelings or emotions. She surrenders herself and her choices to Amma and Kishanbhai. In her meeting with M.D.Vishnu:

> She closed her eyes and thought of coffee, of her friend Savitha, of the broken dolls, she so dearly loved ---After that experience it was all the same. Most times she did not even bother to look at the men’s face or body. She just ceased to react.²⁸

Aasha Rani does not enthrall and enslave men. Rather she hated the very act and things associated with it in the beginning. Her mind always went out of her body in nauseating moments of her early sex encounters. She experienced settling violent conflict within. With Seth Amirchand, Aasha Rani is divided into two halves – one remains in the bed and another travels, ‘far away in some distant and listening to bird calls, and looking at a dozen rainbows’.²⁹

Aasha Rani develops a deep attachment to Akshay Arora, a famous Bollywood sex symbol because he is able to reciprocate her feelings and a sense of security to her. He has the potential to make her feel a woman, a soul mate or real companion. Akshay too finds her company very fulfilling. Though they have sex with so many people, but they experience a complete satisfaction when they are together. She wanted to marry him, but he declines her proposal. Driven by her strong desire to marry Akshay Arora, she is ready to
forsake everything. Her indifference to her career for Akshay’s love explains the intensity of her desire to fill the enormous emotional void, caused by her loveless childhood. Akshay who too conscious of his family man image, not only insults Aasha Rani publicly but also gives her severe blows mercilessly. His wife Malini ill-treated her more and calls her Whore stealing husbands, destroying lives. Entire industry comes to know of it. To keep her mind off Akshay she takes Amar in bed. She also have attempted suicide but all in vain. Aasha Rani’s love for Akshay, crossing the barriers of earthly love, remains constant even in the vicissitude of her life. She is often hunted by the sweet memories of happy moments. Despite her numerous intimate sessions viz., her disappointing bed experience with Suhas, the art film director, her tender lesbian relationship with Linda, an attractive film journalist of Showbiz, she is unable to keep her heart and mind off Akshay. She is unable to concentrate on her work which worries her directors. Tushar a seasoned hero suggests her about the impersonal and cruel nature of Bombay film industry governed by the rule – ‘You are as good as your last film.’

Abhijit takes Aasha Rani’s mind off Akshay by making her drown her sorrows in champagne and never feel alone with millions of its bubbles. He goes to see Aasha Rani just for sex. She knows well that Abhijit was also screwing the screen image. She does not want to see Abhijit after his marriage with Nikita:
You are married man with a lovely young wife and yet, you come to me why? For sex nothing else! ---- I am just your celebrity fuck. I wouldn’t turn you on as much had I been nobody – just a sexy Madrasi girl with big tits you aren’t making love to me. You are screwing my image – my screen image.  

We can find out several incidents through the discourse where a woman is identified only for her body and not as a person. Her existence is restricted merely as a body and a thing for enjoyment. There is no need to consider her feelings. As De’s women characters are aware of this fact, they use their sexual potential for material gains but are still in search of true love and sense of security. Their conception of power in terms sex makes their situation more complex. While women are denied other forms of power (political educational, legal) they will make use of whatever power is left to them: in particular their sexual power, to attract men because they are taught and have learned their lesson well that they can only draw power from sexual relationships rather than having any autonomous potency of their own.

Aasha Rani comes to realize that control of Amma on her life leaves no scope for her to live a free life. She escapes with Abhijit to New Zealand. But during their journey break of Singapore, Abhijit’s father Amrish Mehra, a top industrialist takes him back and gives ample money to Aasha Rani. Once again she is left all alone in an unknown land. Her chance meeting with Jamie (Jay) Phillips changes her life. He
proves to be an ardent, passionate and loving husband. Her happy marriage with Jay and five years of anonymous life afterwards, is the only oasis in the desert of her life. As a loving wife in her happy world she enjoys, being away from the lights of Bollywood. She is so absorbed in her happy world that she refuses to call anyone, including her Amma, during her pregnancy. After the birth of Sasha, Aasha Rani firmly decides to bring up her with all love and care. She proves to be a lovely affectionate and caring mother for Sasha. Enjoying her new found bliss in the company of her daughter Sasha she rejects Jay’s idea of visiting her family in India. Jay finds her indifference to her past life so unnatural.

Despite her hatred and bitterness for her people in India, Jay succeeds to persuade her to visit India around Holi. They decide to make it via London. Her visit to London reminds her of her previous visit five years ago when she was the upcoming supernova on the scene with three major hits running simultaneously. Notwithstanding her five years long absence from the screen, she is recognized by the people in London. The sudden attention reawakens the stardom in her. It reminds her of being the ‘sweetheart of millions’. It has thematic importance as it makes her second entry into the world of Cinema. Jay leaves no stone unturned to make Aasha Rani realize by his unwearied efforts that she might be happier after her come back. Aasha Rani’s mother also tried to help her come out of dilemma very cunningly and convincingly.
At last Aasha Rani succumbs and accepts unwillingly the role of mother-in-law in Jojo’s film. In her temptation to grab important role in the film, she involves herself in adulterous relationship with film producer Jojo. At once she is severely punished by Jojo’s scheming wife who sends ruffians to set her house on fire. At this stage news of death of Akshay’s tragic death is yet another blow to Aasha Rani. In state of sheer helplessness and grief, Aasha Rani takes flight to New Zealand to fall back upon the warm love of Sasha. A more severe blow is given to her by the unexpected and unbelievable betrayal by Jay. She is left without home after being driven out of home by her husband Jay who had an affair with Alice, the governess of Sasha and also poisons heart of Sasha against her. While returning back from New Zealand in the mood of despair, Aasha Rani decides to settle down in London. She finds a job in London and comes in contact with Shonali. During her seven and half months stay in London, everything proved to be a mess. She is trapped by Gopal Krishnan who first uses her and later exploits her. At every step of her life, Aasha Rani falls a victim to the notorious designs of men as she thinks:

Whichever way one looked at it, there was always a man in the picture, a man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman. 31

During her stay in Madras, she brushes aside all bitterness and past memories of her father and proved to be a loving daughter. She
decides to stay with Appa sometimes. The situation of a woman in patriarchal society is aptly illustrated by Aasha Rani’s state as she comes across several men in her life. Once Appa explains her how age-old traditions of society empower men to suppress, torment and deceive women. As Appa tells her:

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 --- The only difference is that some men can control their true feelings of superiority. These men are called ‘cultured’. Other men display them openly. They make their wives feel under constant obligation. That is the best way to keep them suppressed. 32

Whenever selfish realities of life nab her, Aasha Rani repeatedly realizes the fulfilling of her materialistic achievements in glamorous but cruel world of Bollywood. Aasha Rani also suffers at the hands of her younger sister Sudha who had stolen everything from her. Aasha Rani has learnt a lot from trials and tribulations of her life. Besides being sensitive and affectionate woman, she reconstructs herself by shouldering the responsibility to modernize the studio to keep her Appa’s will. She also looks forward to the future of Sasha as tomorrow’s girl of silver screen.
Other female characters like Geetadevi (Amma), Sudha, Malini, Rita also reveal the aspects of their marginality. Geeta Devi, mother of Aasha Rani has suffered a lot as she was abandoned by her husband to fight with poverty and deprivation with three girls to raise. She had even to prostitute to continue dance lessons for Aasha Rani and support the family. She lived in slums, faced all kinds of humiliation and exploitation. With innate strength to reconstruct her life, she reweaves the fabric of her life courageously but meek and subservived 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. She was not only ill-treated by her husband but also by Girija whom he intended to marry. She had to sell her jewelry and shift to slums with her growing daughters.

In spite of her sufferings Amma remained devoted to her husband, a faithful wife and a vigilant caretaker of the house. At the time of Appa’s illness, Amma stays with him in the hospital, eliminates all bitterness and wanted Aasha Rani to see her Appa in the hospital. Aasha Rani bitter, defiant and fiery can hardly understand her Amma’s devotion to a man who had caused her and her children nothing but pain. The novel beautifully provides a contrast to silently suffering Geeta Devi by juxtaposing her with modern women like Kishenbhai’s wife, Jojo’s wife and Malini. When cheated by their husbands, they came out of their homes and
cried out loud to win back their lost husbands at any cost. Malini accompanied by Rita dashingly goes to Snarl at Aasha Rani to bring Akshay back. Malini also suffers at the hands of her husband. Akshay being a womanizer is incapable of understanding her sensitive as well as artistic nature. He also scoffs at her music, hates her and mocks Malini’s sacrifice offered for happy life:

For what? For giving up her career? For docilely agreeing to his every whim and providing him with a home, he could be proud of? For sacrificing, yes sacrificing everything to be Mrs. Arora.  

Malini is an educated woman with a good cultural background. She is a Gazal Singer and is just getting recognition as a Gazal singer. When Akshay Arora, the leading star of the film world proposes to her she consents to marry Akshay and very well knows that he had chosen her not because he loves her but because he wants a home maker someone who will be good mother to his children:

I don’t want to marry a painted doll, some cheap film girl who will flirt with all my friends. Malini is the right woman for me.  

Through the character of Malini, De comments on the status of thousands of women who sacrifice their careers and opt to be marginal in preference for marriage. De also comments on the gender bias prevalent in the social conventions. The general attitude of the woman to mold themselves into ‘Ideal woman’ image proves suicidal for them. De also exposes the double standards prevalent in the society.
Malini’s husband Akshay as a male chauvinist demands total devotion and faithfulness from his wife, but he indulges freely in not one but innumerable extra marital affairs. Thus Malini completely lost her identity and her individuality by converting herself into the film industry’s ‘bhabhiji’.

Rita is the wife of a rich film producer Kailash who is so obviously unfaithful to Rita. But she does not protest instead considers herself lucky that she does not get beaten up and is allowed to spend as much money as she wants. She tells Malini after she has showdown with Aasha Rani:

> Look at it this way sweetiee----you have his name. You live well. ----Romance finishes the morning after the wedding night. After that what? Boredom. Men like variety----of course at this stage you hate Akshayji. That’s normal. In any case 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 a choice?  

Thus, marriage for women is considered as the ultimate goal for which they can sacrifice anything. In fact woman should know the tactics to control animal like man as Rita brings out stark reality in her dialogues:

> Men are all the same animals ---and we women such fools----Romance finishes the morning after the wedding night----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 ---Everything is decided on the bed, on the bed. 36

Sudha Rani is another woman character who like Aasha Rani is exploited for money by her mother, in the same style. After being disappointed with Aasha Rani, after her marriage, Amma cleverly transplants Sudha in film industry. She takes Sudha to Sethji and Cajoles to make her a star. She forcibly threw Amar by locking her with Amar in a room. Besides she instigated Sudha to try to talk to Jay for clandestine meeting in Bombay.

But Sudha proved to be different from Aasha Rani. She is very selfish. Reaching to stardom, she neglects Amma and hates her sister. But she also meets a horrifying disaster due to her inordinate ambition. She had borrowed heavy money from the reigning underworld don to produce a megahit. Out of greed, she manipulated the accounts and reaped tragedy for herself. Her murder was attempted by burning her on the road where she could somehow save to be admitted in the hospital with 60% burns.

Shobha De suggests through her women characters in *Starry Nights* that whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously, flout morality in the name of their struggle for success in life, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. Male dominant society is ever ready to harass, exploit and ferment them be it within the limits
of family or outside in any field. Thus she articulates the marginal status of women through various women characters.

Shobha De’s *sisters*, set in the corrupt world of big business, appears to tell an interesting story of two wealthy and socialite women, who driven by ambition and lust are involved in an unending rivalry. But it is in Mallika (Mikki) that we encounter a woman who struggles against the constraints of being a woman and finally completes her odyssey towards being herself.

When narrative opens, Mikki the protagonist compelled by the untimely death of her parents in an air crash, leaves America for Bombay to take charge of her father’s industries which are on the verge of collapse. It is too much a burden for a woman like Mikki, whose twentieth birthday was just three months away. She is in reality unprepared for any responsibility that can deprive her of her personal freedom. Her initial aversion for the corporate business is mainly due to her fear of losing the colorful life in America where she has had her first taste of life.

Mikki’s father, Seth Hiralal Alias Bachchoobhai rose from a small time merchant of scrape to his position as the undisputed tycoon of tycoons with a string of industries to his name. He married to Maltiben a princess. Besides Mikki, Hiralal has one more ‘daughter’ from ‘another woman a longtime Mistress, Leelaben.’ Her name is Alisha. Mikki and Alisha react to the tragic situation in their own different ways. Mikki has
to face the trauma of her parent’s untimely death in air crash. Society considers that tender feelings are more highly developed in woman which limits her to come out from any shocking news but in spite of frantic with worry or grief, Mikki does not lose her patience and courage. Boldly she prevents her maidservant Gangubai to weep and says that what has happened has happened. This confidence to face this intimate loss shows that her independent personality cannot be choked because of her being female. Like traditional women, 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.  

In this male dominated society, man has no distinction between his public and private life, while a woman has to act in both affairs. After the sad demise of her parents, being a girl, Mikki socially has no right to enjoy in public places but she refuses to be a hypocrite and enact a false show of mourning. She rather takes up a bold step against social assumptions:

She did not need this. Not now she was aware she had broken the rules by stepping out in public so soon after her parent’s death. But she’d decided she wasn’t going to be hypocrite and sit around at home pretending to be in mourning like the others from her community.
Ramanbhai’s, a trusted employee of Seth; revelation of Alisha’s existence and their relations as half-sisters makes Mikki realize that she is not alone. But Alisha appears as an angry young woman. She violently reacts to the death of her father. She resolves to fight for her ‘identity’ and her ‘share’ in her father’s business. For Alisha money gives identity and is more important than any human relation and for Mikki, blood relations are more valuable than wealth.

The new development brings an aura of maturity and a sense of responsibility to Mikki – she is struck by the opulence of her father’s office. In her new role of the head of Hiralal Industries she chooses to be practical and concentrate on the areas of her father’s life which she does not know. She makes her stand very clear when she takes over the charge of Hiralal industries after her father’s death. She intends to run the industries on her own terms.

To know the standing of her father’s industries she says to Ramankaka, a confident employee of her father, to arrange a meeting with solicitors and accountants. But he suggests her not to fix her foot in her father’s shoes because it is not worth like for a woman Mikki who has decided her stance emphatically, declares:

Thank you for your advice Ramankaka. I appreciate and value your word. But I’d like you to hear a few of mine now. I can’t change my sex unfortunately ----but I can change just about everything else ----and I intend to ----this is going to be my show and I intend running on
my terms. If the old solicitors aren’t prepared to talk turkey with me I will sack them. That goes for the accountants and anybody else who wishes to treat me like a simple minded spoilt little girl out to play being a businesswoman. My genes are the same as my father’s even if my gender isn’t.  

Here Mikki challenges the usual conventional view of restricting women to certain professions like teachers, doctors, advocates, etc. These authoritative words of Mikki challenge the age-old concept of Indian society that treats a girl’s business acumen as worthless and hence not dependable. In conventional male dominated society it is usually the man who has the power to decide which is expected to be followed by women.

Once Mikki puts herself seriously into the stock of company reports and balance sheets, and spends time with it. She learns from Ramanbhai that the state of finance of her companies is pathetic and her father has arranged the things in such a way that now all the money belongs to Alisha, her half-sister and not to her. De’s novels probe the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within the patterns of submission and dominance. The struggle of women presented in De’s fiction is directed only against male hegemony and supremacist attitude of men. Patriarchy plays the role of the only major enemy of women’s freedom. All the unusual activities of women in De’s fiction form a way of protest against masculine authority. In order to expose the myth of male supremacy women challenge and reject different patterns of
behavior established on the basis of the ideas ascribing a superior position to men. The reversal of roles forms a major part of De’s narratives that present male characters as caricatures. In most of De’s novels the women take the central position and men remain on periphery.

In *Sisters*, it is Mikki who seems to control and direct the acting of the novel. She takes over the control of Hiralal Industries and claims equality with men. In their new found ideas of self-identity these women concentrate on gaining power in man-woman relationships. De’s major concern seems to inform the awareness that has dawned on these women about their marginalization and these women’s belief that they deserve an equal status to men.

Mikki is surrounded by various hostile people with hidden agendas. Even her own relatives are not genuinely sympathetic towards her. Her aunt Anjanaben is a scheming and manipulative woman. Contrary to his mother’s nature, Shanay is sensible enough to be realistic and understands Mikki’s state of mind. Alisha and Leelaben hate her. Even Ramankaka proves to be a double dealer. He meets Alisha and Leelaben without any information to Mikki, in order to manipulate Hiralal’s enormous wealth. He never reveals the actual position of Hiralal Industries to Mikki. Shanay’s liking for Mikki makes him leave his diamond business and join Mikki’s core group in Hiralal Industries. The novelist sums up his role in a few words:
Still the same worn doormat, lying at her feet with a large ‘use me’ written over him.  

It is Shanay’s sincerity and hard work that he digs out the facts that someone in Hiralal Industries has been in touch with Alisha and that Hiralal’s plane crash was not an accident. Being educated and liberated young woman without any legitimate guardian to look after her, Mikki attended many parties and came in contact with many young as well as middle aged persons. Many young men were interested in her. After rejecting Shanay, Mikki dates Navin and got engaged to Navin. Binny Malhotra, a big business tycoon extends his proposal to take on Hiralal Industries which are likely to collapse. Though she finds Binny maddeningly attractive she refuses to be swept away by emotions. As a woman of modern ideas, Mikki is capable of differentiating both marriage and an ‘affair’. She has practical views about marriage:

Yes, I know, Mikki replied, but Navin is well off. He may help me with Hiralal Industries ---, Mikki looked thoughtful as she said what real difference is it going to make? If it is not Navin it will be some other rich man’s son. And they are all the same anyway like my father.

On suggestion of Shanay, Mikki decides to borrow money from her fiancée Navin. The shallowness of Navin’s claims of love and friendship is revealed to her when Navin rejects the idea to negotiate on loan deal on behalf of Mikki with his mother Sudhaben. Unable to cope with the humiliation brought by her over estimation of her own position in Navin’s life, she announces a break-off in their relationship without
caring for social rules. The following words of her shows her assertive and strong view towards life:

She leaned towards Shanay and said cheer up. It is not the end of the world, you know. We will find someone else to help us out. The engagement was off, she stated simply, without going into elaborate explanation. Surprisingly, Mikki didn’t feel bitter at all. She raised her glass and clinked it with Shanay’s ‘To life’ she said.

Binny took advantage of the situation and lured away Mikki by giving costly presents and promising financial help. Binny being an elderly person and a past master in the art of love-making lured Mikki to his bed and forced her to marry him. By marrying Mikki, he wanted to achieve a social status and acceptance. Binny showed his true color after marriage. Binny continued to have affair with women of his choice and made Mikki a willy-nilly domestic woman. Being a representative of the oppressive system, Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner both in life and business. He is characteristically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife:

No that’s not how it works, in my family. Our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfill their husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going.

Binny Malhotra is a symbol of conventional male with essential male chauvinism. He tries his best to maintain his
unquestioned intrinsic superiority in the family and society. When Mikki tries to convince him regarding her working he bullies her in the following words:

Listen very carefully, princess. This is no longer your father’s home and you are no longer the pampered child. You are Binny Malhotra’s wife. And you’d better start behaving like her. In our family women are trained to obey their husbands. Thank your stars, you don’t have mother-in-law to please. You will never, I repeat, never question me ---- or complain. You have nothing to complaint about ----got that? Your life is perfect. You have everything ----everything. Where I go, what I do, when and with whom is my business. I will spend as much time with you as I choose to. There are social duties and obligations which you will fulfill. If I feel it’s necessary for you to travel with me for some purpose, it will happen that way. Your job is to look beautiful. I told you that when I married you. Buy clothes, buy jewelry. Go to the beauty parlor, play bridge, learn golf. Attend cooking classes. That’s all. But no questions --- you don’t have the right and none of this cheeky business. I will not tolerate it. 45

The subordination of women in a malist culture is symptomatic of hierarchisation of socio-moral values between the sexes. It symbolizes the polarity between activity and passivity between meek obedience and defiance. Helene Cixous observes:
A male privilege can be seen in the position between activity and passivity. Traditionally the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition, activity passivity.  

Women are often the symbols of passivity. Cixous further maintains:

Either the woman is passive, or she doesn’t exist. What is left is unthinkable, un-thought of. She does not enter into the opposition. She is not coupled with the father who is coupled with the son.

Woman is thus reduced to matter, a mere object. This reduction of women to matter or a commodity is the main phallocentric pattern. Binny treats Mikki as a mere object, subject to his own will. This is a nice example of traditional gender hostility used to elaborate the polarities of connubiality. Mikki is too helpless to assert her position and fight male aggressiveness. Her marriage is a failure. She says to Amy:

I wanted someone with whom I could share my life. Is that such an impossible expectation?

Mikki signs everything over to Binny’s control just in order to become his wife who proves disastrous to her but she does not blame anyone else for it. She is deeply fascinated by Binny Malhotra’s approach and decides to marry him impulsively unaware of the fact that he has a family – Urmi, his mistress and two children Urvashi and Nitya.
She had placed herself in a situation in which she was at Binny’s mercy stripped clean of all her assets, her business, her properties – just about every conceivable possession. She’d treated in all that for love. Everlasting love. And now it seemed to her that she’d been short changed. Cheated. A sense of panic convulsed her. It was too late ----too late----too late. \(^{49}\)

Mikki is put to the test of life by her marriage with Binny. Her life loses its meaning when he snubs her for being pregnant and asks her to go for an abortion or divorce. In the core of her heart, Mikki seems to have accepted the agreement. She tries to convince herself of her otherwise ridiculous position while in conversation with Amy who defines her present position as “a legitimate prostitute” Mikki justifies herself by generalizing her situation.

I don’t expect you to understand sometimes these things are too complicated for an outsider. All I know is, I satisfy him, he satisfies me. I don’t care how that makes me look. Besides all wives are prostitutes to some extent weren’t you? Didn’t you use your body to reward or punish? What’s the big difference? \(^{50}\)

Even after getting the worst treatment by Binny, she loves him a lot. Her self-pride is consumed by her urge to be loved and accepted. She is starved so far as love and admiration from a patronizing male is concerned. She has everything from wealth to fame, but no human touch of parental love. She has a namesake mother who never Cuddles her and let her dash into her bosom. Seth Hiralal too wasn’t a warm father who
could provide her with a male model and let her experience what a protective male embrace was:

On umpteen occasions it had been Ramanbhai and not Seth Hiralal, who had escorted her and her mother to various functions. She remembered one particular occasion clearly when it had broken her heart not to have her father present. It was the day she had led her victorious school team ----Mikki’s eyes had scanned the stadium stands anxiously----Instead she’d caught Ramankaka’s friendly face. 51

It is this lack of warmth that sends her reeling into the mature, strong and manly arms of Binni Malhotra. Also it is this emotional hallow which prevents her from doubting any move of Ramankaka even after clear indication from Shanay. To her the protective umbrella of Binni seeking perfect answer for all her emotional needs ---she is willing to retain this cover at any cost. Mikki whimpered:

Amy you aren’t going to believe this---- but I don’t want to fix him. Trouble is I love the man call me a doormat, a slave, a victim, anything. But, I feel hopeless and helpless, it is as if I’ve forgotten what pride is ---or ever was. He can and does. she is reduced to a commodity trample all over me. 52

She also comes to realize that Urmi is the recipient of his love and Mikki is turned out of the house by her husband on a false charge of adultery. It is because she has taken a cooking course from a male French cook Lucio in her husband’s absence. Even at this
stage she is fighting for her right and is afraid of any type of scandal. When Amy provokes Mikki to assert her self-respect Mikki is unwilling to cross the boundary of a typical traditional Indian woman. She exposes her helplessness when she says:

He (her husband) is like a god to me. I do not care who he sleeps with. All I care is that I am his wife and that he comes home to me.53

The rest of the novel deals with poetic justice and dramatically the events take drastic turns. Binny Malhotra’s death changes all equations. It changes the legal status of Mikki from homeless deserted woman to a rich young widow. As Binny, his mistress and their two children are killed in a car accident; Mikki becomes the sole owner of Hiralal Industries as well as Binny’s empire. The novel ends like a light hearted detective Hindi movie with Mikki’s Kidnap and her rescue by the hero Shanay who appears to be a perfect nonhero material in the beginning. Ramanbhai, a father figure to Mikki turns out to be a big schemer. He falls victim to his own grand ambition. The death of Leelaben and the following incidents bring two sisters, together.

Sisters show how women are victims of male-passions. Seth Hiralal, a married man, had raped his watchman’s wife who died in forced abortion. He made Sapna pregnant and her inside was damaged in abortion. Alisha is his daughter from his keep Leelaben. Binny Malhotra has a mistress and children but he marries Mikki and forces her to go for abortion otherwise he will divorce her.

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Mrs. Amrita Kumar, a friend of Mikki symbolizes today’s liberated woman who lives a practical life and knows how to survive in this world full of absurdities, the daughter of prince Paramjit and princess Urmila. Amy is another princess who had married a commoner. It symbolizes the changing social equations in modern era contrary to her royal background she believes in living for today and does not hesitate to accept modern social ethics. She does not look upon marriage as an eternal bond. On the other hand, she advises Mikki to use marriage in order to salvage her falling financial condition. Amy has no romantic notions about marriage. She enlightens Mikki to see the truth in her advice:

You have married a man of the world ---not a poet. Be realistic. Don’t expect him to molly Coddle you- he has better things to do.  

The idea of liberated woman in today’s world is not confined to the privileged upper class glamorous women only. It includes middle class working mothers, represented by Tarini, Mikki’s old school friend. Tarini works at Bhavana’s office and asserts her love for Shashi, her colleague despite the fact she is married and has children. She justified her affair as:

You think only rich societies are entitled to other relationships well, let me tell you that the man I’m involved with is not rich or powerful like your husband or like any other men –Of course, he is married. But so what? He is honest, principled, committed to his cause.
She asserts the right of woman to have her own identity and individuality. She continues:

It is not only glamorous, beautiful women who have affairs. Even an ordinary woman like me sometimes, finds someone who loves her, cares for her, and wants to spend his life with her. I just thank God for Shashi. For allowing me to experience what love is what sex is ---with the right person. Now my husband’s saying that I am a woman of loose, unstable character, that I can’t even visit my children on weekends. I am here trying to get custody of the little one at least---he’s so small.56

De recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. Her novels delineate the awakening of woman’s consciousness which implies her to strive for self-actualization in an absurd and oppressive world. This awakened consciousness of women stands for the human effort to be a whole human being regardless of difference in gender, caste, and religion. It is to be the credit of Shobha De that in concentrating on the struggle of modern women as they assert their independence and attempt to realize their potentialities.

Alisha, the bastard daughter of Seth Hiralal appears as an angry young woman. Her reaction to the news of Seth Hiralal’s death survived by his only daughter Mikki shakes her terribly. Her own identity as another daughter of Seth Hiralal seems to be lost in this news. Her questions: And what me? What am I? A puppy? A kitten? A pet?
Reveals her search for individual identity. She cannot tolerate being lost. She resolves to fight for herself and her share in her Father’s business and considers Mikki as her enemy. Alisha’s frustration, hate and antagonism have their roots in her being an illegitimate daughter. Her desperation to legitimize her existence and her relation with her father Seth Hiralal, takes her to his home to participate in the funeral only to be turned away. She wants to be there as Seth Hiralal’s other daughter – the one he had fathered but never acknowledged. Her antagonism towards Mikki is the result of her constant comparison of herself with Mikki and she finds Mikki as the privileged one.

In fact it is not Mikki alone; Alisha hates everyone and everything in the world. It is the result of her troubled childhood as she did not enjoy the serenity of a happy home in which both parents could have participated whole heartedly in order to bring her up. Alisha’s contempt for her mother too is not without reason. She has no sympathy for her continuous self-pitying and ‘boozing and Pills’. She has been a constant witness to her mother’s infidelities; her indiscriminate jumping into bed.

Alisha hates the life of wants without sufficient money to enjoy it. She decides not to waste her life as her mother did by boozing, crying and feeling sorry all the time. Alisha’s contempt for her mother Leelaben continues well after her death also. Her unsophisticated tastes and sexual perversions are the reflections of her childhood environment, which reveal her parent’s attitude. Seth
Hiralal could never get enough of women as he had moved on to his next woman a young Anglo Indian hairdresser from Calcutta—and the next—and the next. Her mother Leelaben didn’t even try to hide her sinister tendencies from Alisha. Alisha had accepted the fact a long time ago—her mother was a slut.

Modern urban Indian woman is quite carefully and objectively portrayed in the novels of Shobha De. This new Indian woman is all set to defy the orthodox morality and the stale tradition of the rigid sex roles assigned to her. Alisha believes in sexual freedom. She dislikes the idea of getting married. When her mother Leelaben worries about Alisha’s future:

---will I live to see the day when you have mehendi on your hands without a father, without even his proper name, who will marry my girl? Nobody in the community 57

Alisha dismisses her worries as non-sense and reacts in a wild rage:

---I don’t want to get married you hear? But if I choose to, I’ll be able to get whosoever I want, even Prince Charles. Yes, yes, don’t make a face. Money can buy the best husband in the world. And today I have it----As per your great community, you can keep it. I wouldn’t want to marry some Gujjubhai in any case. I’d rather die a spinster. 58

Owing to her troubled childhood, Alisha pursues satisfaction through ascendance and domination of others. Along with her need
for domination and independence, she exhibits a tendency to actualize her needs for belongingness and love. Her brief though passionate affair with Navin is the outcome of her hatred for Mikki. Even her love making with Navin becomes an instrument of revenge against Mikki. But affair with Navin does not give her long lasting inner satisfaction. She then has an affair with Dr. Kurien, her mother’s doctor. Kurien is reluctant to respond for he is a married man with children. The death of his youngest child convinces him that it is divine punishment for having an extra marital affair and then withdraws from Alisha.

The patriarchal way of life with its long history has constantly hammered certain ideas down in the minds of men and women. It becomes extremely difficult for women, in spite of their awareness that this system works against their independent existence, to free themselves from the control of established patriarchal system. The functioning of these overbearing though seemingly invisible factors has been artistically and emphatically illustrated by De in her *Sisters*. The presentation of these elements has a decisive role in structuring the narrative. For example the recurrence of a particular challenge to patriarchal male in De’s fictional design, is also accompanied by the rebel woman’s ultimate desire to have a male companion. This female desire informs modern woman’s typical state of indecision expressed in these words:
The modern woman is striving to be free and self-reliant but then the timidity and difference, the product of the years slavish and protected life pattern are causing a big hurdle.  

Another reason for the marginalized women’s attitude of resigned acceptance of their miserable lot and their advice to the others may be the absence of any alternative. De’s fiction expresses her concentration on the possible ways and means to provide women a viable space. In her efforts to show these women’s awareness of their suppression the novelist seems to resist from portraying them as eternal victims. Society with its installed rules circumscribes a woman to show her as essential being in sexual alliance. She is learnt not to expose her appetites and to participate boldly in sexual activities. Under this service position she does not have freedom to express her sexual urge against social taboos. But this social norm is also foundered by De’s woman who constitutes her own culture. Society considers that a female does not necessarily long for a life of body whereas the fact is that sexuality is a unitary quality as essential as that of the man. In heterosexuality, a woman is an inactive person; she is no more an alive being and self-willing person. Because of the discrimination of two sexes in sexual association where man has a sense of superiority and woman annoys for her passivity imbues a woman with homosexuality. With woman, she does not feel any need for pretense. This intimacy brings for her a sense of wholly herself which she cannot realize in presence of a male partner. In heterosexuality De writes:
the woman feels inferior because, in fact the requirement of femininity does belittle her whereas woman’s homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh.  

De’s fourth novel *Strange Obsession* is different from other novels. Published in 1992, the novel deals with the theme of refusal of the modern Indian woman to carry the load of traditional morality and their liberation from the dictate of traditional morality and the dictate of traditional male chauvinated society.

The novel depicts the obsession of a psychotic woman, Meenakshi Iyengar (Minx) with Amrita, a gorgeous young girl who comes to Bombay to make her career in the world of modeling. Amrita comes from a noble and educated family decides to search her lot in modeling. In order to execute long cherished desire she settles down in Bombay. In Bombay, she encounters with Minx, a modern and high flown lady, free from all taboos and values. Being a daughter of Inspector General, she is always conscious of exploiting the power and position for her gimmicks. She is very much pervert and polluted in her thought and plan.

*Strange Obsession* does not deal with the struggle for power and feminism. Minx is Lesbian, eccentric who behaves like a male. She is thoroughly deprived of womanliness. On the thematic plane there does not seem to be a question of power. But on the theoretical plane it is difficult to disagree with the basic questions of power pleasure. In her theoretical perspective Shobha De argues:
Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level. The very concept of the sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive.  

Shobha De deconstructs the traditional concepts of love and sex and naturally romance and sexuality as made out by the novelist create a conflict in the social and cultural society. The woman who refashions herself in the novel is Minx who is presented as a materialistic, lusty and liberated figure. Amrita, the young supermodel is made to undergo a sickening experience by the all dominating and powerful minx. Her meeting with Minx turned out to be a turning point in her life. In fact that was only a prelude to a series of events which were to follow. In earlier stages Amrita used every opportunity to show her disgust at Minx when she began to chase her like a bloodhound.

Lesbianism is a “Counter revolution” against the foundation of male privileged society. It refuses male authority in sexual regime where woman’s feelings and desires for sexual pleasure are discarded. In sexual field also De’s woman does not want to be dominated as an object or as a subordinate person. Not allowing male superiority, Minx behaves like a free woman who can do each and every impossible work. When it appears to Minx that Amrita is not tuned to her wave length she waves a false story to be raped by her father. Fundamentally it exhibits her ‘intention to find Amrita’s love but when anyone tries to peep into its deeper roots, it seems bitter
hatred for male and his supervisory. It is needless to say that from her infancy a female child lives in her parent’s attachment and sees the world through their lives so it is in her father, she senses first time male domination and male ownership. She realizes how a man rules in every sphere from house to outside and how he refuses her value in every surrounding. She notices her mother have to obey all commands of her husband. So a feeling of humiliation is rooted in her mind for male hierarchy. As a counter revolution, she tries to distrust man in every possible way in her life. In her father she perceives image of a man who always controls and regulates woman according his own will. That’s why she imagines having incestuous relationship with her father.

Meenakshi’s crazy attraction towards Amrita scares her. Her obsession is such that she scares the males also who try to approach Amrita. Minix crosses all limits in order to prevent anyone who shows any interest in Amrita, whether he is Ranjit Grover or Karan. In fact Amrita is not the first girl to fall into her trap as Karan warns Amrita against her intimate terms with Minx. Minx is not deterred even after being told by Amrita in plain words that she does not approve of her type of social affair. The aggression in Minx’s behavior towards those who appear as threat to her endeavor to attain safety or safe discharge of her anxiety is her effort to protect her security. Amrita is at the receiving end of all this and is the worst victim of it. Amrita is the safest means to realize her energy without
any threat. When Ranjit Grover comes near Amrita and starts dating her regularly, Minx gets him beaten mercilessly by the police. She also attacks a model Lola, who steals Amrita’s assignment. Amrita also arranges a road accident to kill Parthsarthy, the high profile editor of weekend, a news magazine. He is injured critically for the simple reason that he tries to expose her life and save Amrita from her clutches. It is just not only the others she harms. In order to fulfill her urges, she even tries to get rid of her “Ugly enormous breasts” so that she can have a manly look and be acceptable to Amrita as a life partner. It is a state of utter anxiety that she is not comfortable with her own sexuality.

A majority of women both Lesbian and heterosexual, are taught that their sexuality must conform to certain modes of behavior. The society with its existent cultures, voices shame upon a woman if she goes beyond the criteria of passivity and repression and doubts her virtue if she refuses. A woman is taught to suppress sexual desires and needs by concealing all pleasure to the male, even about participation and satisfaction in sex is taboo. So most women learn to hate their bodies and usually possess little knowledge of their bodies and their reproductive systems or their physiology.

It’s true that inability of a woman to realize her own worth made her inferior to man all the time. A woman even in our times never had given so much of thought to her sexual behavior, nor even realized how far she has an equal amount of participation or
willingness in her sexual relationship with a man. She has to display the image of the weak, shy, traditional who feels it is an unwomanly behavior to express her sexual desires. Shobha De shatters this image of the traditional woman in her novels and presents the daring non-conformist and highly self-confident image of the new woman. She gives so much of independence to her main women characters that they are shown admirably strong and highly intriguing persons who challenge male hegemony fearlessly. Minx experiences a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment when she gets Amrita move into her flat in Colaba just off Cuffe Parade. She feels great in playing husband to Amrita. But Amrita has undergone many emotional disturbances, because of Minx. Forced by Minx, she starts responding to Minx’s homosexual advances which put her in a state of emotional crisis whether she will be able to live a satisfactory married life with Rakesh Bhatia.

Amrita tries to interject the strange ways of Minx so that she can avoid her neurotic reaction and absurd retaliation. However, it only adds to her miseries as she cannot completely identify with Minx’s abnormal sexuality. Before meeting Rakesh, Amrita seems to have settled herself with Minx as an essential fixture in her lot. Rakesh comes as a ray of hope to Amrita that she can escape from the ugly clutches of Minx. He is a young man from New York interested in marrying her. The abnormal and weird environment created by Minx has affected her considerably. She is desperate to
grab the first opportunity selfishly and at any cost to move away from Minx’s clutches. She is least bothered about who he is, what he does or how he looks. Her interest in him is that he lives in New York, where she can go after escaping from the clutches of Minx. This thought of liberation gives her an immense pleasure.

The presence of Rakesh Bhatia poses a great threat to weird but secure arrangement of Minx make-believe world. In a state of desperation she attacks Amrita in order to bring her back under her control and acquire the earlier state of security. She burns Amrita’s eyelashes and pubic hair in order to terrify her. She follows Amrita and Rakesh even after their marriage and succeeds in kidnapping Rakesh from Nainital during their honeymoon. She forces them to have sex in front of her and shots it. She sets the place on fire in a state of hysteria.

The final disintegration of Minx’s personality is caused by violent increase in her anxiety level as Rakesh (a male) seems a perpetual source of threat to her. The perception of threat is so overwhelming that she feels the presence of Rakesh in Amrita’s body. She no longer finds her sexually attractive on the contrary, the irresistible Amrita appeals repulsive to her. In fact, it is not the individual person called Rakesh who threatens her; it is the presence of a powerful male figure, who symbolizes her super-cop father who dominated her. At this point she comes to feel that she can no longer sustain her revengeful tactics
against the world. Minx dies with all her anxiety and insecurity in her heart, securing a crisp and brief obituary in Hindustan Times:

Iyengar (Meenakshi) passed away on 7th August in Bombay under tragic circumstances. No condolences please. 62

To sum up it may be said that Lesbianism is a consequence of aspiring for greater independence in a woman’s psyche. It is resulted from her inner urge to get sexual satisfaction and equal involvement which has been unjustifiably denied to her by her male counterparts. As the reputed French thinker Simone De Beauvoir observes:

Between women love is contemplative, care. They are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to create the self though her separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat, in exact reciprocity. Each is at once subject and object, Sovereign and slave, duality becomes mutuality. 63

Hite writes that lesbianism can be political. Sex with another woman could be better and more meaningful:

because of the more equal relationship possible. Sex with woman can be a reaction against man and our second class status with them in society. 64

Hite further says:

sex with a man is often the beginning of political education. Sex with a woman means independence from man. 65
Hence the presence of lesbianism in De’s novels is a part of
narrative strategy to expose the marginalization of women’s sexual
desires by men. *Sultry Days* is one of the Shobha De’s most striking
attempts propagating the idea that female subjectivity is not just a
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. *Sultry
Days* infers that a woman with fully integrated personality can solve
many problems in her life and she need not be a victim, a fact
manifested through the women characters generally and Nisha Verma in
particular in the novel.

Nisha Verma, the chief protagonist initially worked in an
advertising agency subsequently adopted the career of a journalist.
During her college days she met God (actual name Deb) who has the
image of an antihero. The unconventional beauty of Nisha is for the first
time appreciated by God. Deb is a freelance writer and a talented man.
He also had won a scholarship to Columbia but failed to avail it because
his father could not afford the airfare. He could cook, sew, write poems,
quote from Upanishads and had an ear for music as well Nisha was
favorably impressed by God’s way like other young girls were and
would spend a lot of time with him buying him plenty of gifts. To quote
the novelist:
I learnt very quickly that I had to bury whatever little ego and pride I had if I wished to hang around God. His attitude towards girls was simple – use them and leave them. There were enough takers around – bold girls whose jaws never stopped working on the thick wads of gum in their mouths. For them God represented some sort of anti-hero and they probably fancied themselves as sexy molls. As for me, I was plain moonstruck. And for once in my life, I wasn’t going to lose out by default.  

God too was attracted towards her though it was difficult to gauge the kind of attachment he had for Nisha. Normally he was indifferent towards her but whenever she skipped college or bunked lectures, he would miss her and would ask her where she was: Nisha was content to be his ‘slave, sidekick, girl’.  

Nisha lived in company of God passionately and happily for above a year. Many people knew them separately as a couple. Nisha adores him for his qualities which appear to be absurd to her parents who find him worthless. Despite opposition from her parents, Nisha comes closer to God. She feels happy in his company and can feel the caring side of his personality despite his insensitivity towards everybody. She is happy that he cares for her as much as he was capable of caring for anyone. She muses over the harmony between them. Nisha goes to any extent in order to please God. She has sex with him just to give him pleasure without herself actually enjoying it. Notwithstanding her adoration and devotion to him, she is unable
to swallow his gross expectations and over possessiveness when it comes to marriage:

I need my own woman. 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. You can cook, can’t you? After all, you are a corporatewallah’s daughter. Have you ever set your foot in a kitchen? – No lafada later on. Don’t expect me to treat you like rich bitch. I’m a seedha saadha fellow – you know that. Give me my daal roti, a warm bed, twice a week maalish and a daily screw. That’s all I expect. So tell me are you interested? 68

Nisha finds the limits of conformity being violated and chooses to hold her ground firmly. Her decision marks a value judgment that shatters an important aspect of patriarchy – woman taken for granted:

One part of me was laughing. The other feeling sorry for this man. He was obviously deranged – or the world’s biggest egoist. He actually expected me to jump at his offer. He looked so comic. So vulnerable standing in the lobby, trying to look nonchalant and heroic. I picked up my bag. 69

Here the novelist asserts that in men’s world a woman is practically insignificant and remains merely a part of man’s property. This problem of an inferior status up to some extent arises from a woman’s sexuality that has been repressed by patriarchal culture especially in traditional society like ours, where due to stark
ignorance, a woman is merely treated as a thing of carnal pleasure. That’s why Nisha rejects God’s offer. The novelist suggests women to value their self-respect more than anything else and raise themselves so as never to submit before man’s autocratic and irrational domination. Nisha’s taking up a job with an ad-agency after graduating with English honors is, in fact her attempt to express herself and to assert her individuality and independence. Above other considerations, it provides her immense pleasure as the salary enables her to give offerings to her God. She considers money given to fulfill God’s requirements as money well spent:

There was nothing apologetic about the demand but curiously it would actually make me feel grateful. And each time he touched me for money, I’d feel a stirring of enthusiasm for my lousy job. At least it gave me a salary which I would use for him.  

De’s women being modern educated and conscious of their marginalization resent different behavioral patterns that perpetuate their suppression. These women not only resent man’s control over money but also challenge man’s monopoly in providing financial security. They assert their right to earn and control money. Rejecting the male claim to provide financial security, women in De’s fiction do not hesitate to accept all those professions which are not considered as good or suitable for women. In some cases even men have to seek financial support from women. Nisha supports Deb until
he gets a job or starts earning from his association with Yashwantbhai.

The relationship of Nisha with God gradually becomes cold enough. God had begun to treat her like a sexless person. One day she goes to meet Iqbal, who overpowers her for sex in the anarchic studio. She told the incident to God but he hardly reacted to it.

Through the portrayal of Nisha, Shobha De throws ample light on the psyche of single woman. Nisha’s home was an unhappy home. They lived together yet they pursued their own paths. Her social life was dominated by girlfriends, divorces, widows and other singles. They met once or twice a month at some five-star bar where drinks were followed by dinner. Occasionally they went to the disco at Taj and danced with each other. The end was depression, returning home to think about the evening and their lives. All the friends concluded that life without a man was meaningless. Mona would say:

Let’s face it girls ---we are hard up. No man, no future. We work, we earn----we deserve some fund. And who knows? ---May be one day while we are sitting at Lancer’s a group of gorgeous guys, will walk in and marry us all. 71

They were optimistically waiting for the day they would be saved by some men. They agreed that being single was not such a ‘hot alternative.’

Female subjectivity is one of the most regressive elements in a social setup. The women long for love, dependency and the material
and emotional comfort of fixed 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 femininity” and oscillates between “reason and desire, autonomy and dependent security, psychic and social identity.” Cora Kaplan stresses this fact in following words:

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 suppression.72

Nisha was influenced by God’s principles and carefree life. But when God is engrossed in fulfilling his material requirements by forgetting his old ideas, Nisha is quite surprised. Success of the magazine ‘Plume’ especially its art page makes Deb one of the most sought after journalists in Bombay. His crazy drift into corruption and capitalist values is confirmed by the fact that he does not hesitate to work for the people who are opposite to his father. God’s new way of life does not appeal her. She explains her utter disapproval to God’s new style of living which had become the bone of contention between them. Feeling that God was no longer committed to their relationship and that he had been swept too far away from their usual simple world, Nisha decides to live life in her own way. She blames Yeshwantbhai for the unpleasant change in God. Nisha blasts the
dark world of Yeshwantbhai whom God had tied up. She starts exposing Yeshwantbhai and also his underworld connections in her write-ups. Nisha always get the support of her mother and social activist Pratimaben in unraveling and bringing to public notice Yeshwantbhai’s atrocities on his former mistress Pramila. Yeshwantbhai expects God to convince Nisha for keeping the story of Pramila as secret. But due to the separation Deb loses hold over Nisha and can’t convince her. As a result he was shot dead by Yashwantbhai. The fatal bullet had entered his stomach and lodged itself in his spinal cord. It took nearly ten days for him to recover enough to get out of ICU and to the general ward. But he finally passed away leaving the heart less people of the world. Nisha boldly faces his death. She realizes that after all God wasn’t any supernatural being. He was just as ‘frail, fragile and helpless’ as any other human being. The papers flashed all kinds of stories on life of God. Nisha stood by him and so did Mrs. Verma with her ‘constant, reassuring presence’. Nisha learns to be courageous from her mother and both the women begin to sustain the men in their lives.

In *Sultry Days*, De takes on a completely new approach towards dealing with the women’s world. In this novel also women are crazy for men, they challenge them and hit them at their own game. But here the women are shown to be not just blind hitters; they are committed and want equal response from men.
The novel also deals with various man-woman relationships to bring out the marginality of women. Firstly, God’s mother adopts a reticent view of the life. She is committed to whatever she has and lives life courageously and never thinks of revolting.

Another important character, Mrs. Verma, Nisha’s mother undergoes an amazing transformation securing complete control over her surroundings. Her feeling of self-worth cannot be kept suppressed by the male ego of her husband for long. In the beginning of the novel she was completely suppressed and submitted to the needs and expectations of her corporate husband. She does not approve of her husband’s corporate life which leaves little scope for genuine human warmth. However, she is emotionally shaken up when she discovers her husband’s infidelity i.e. extramarital affair with a Sindhi divorcee. She reacts in the following words:

---And now it’s all finished. All finished because of some Sindhi woman. That is the worst part. Had she been Punjuabi, I would have understood. May be your father missed his language, his food. May be I should have made his type of Khana more often. 

She bears her husband’s infidelity silently as she does not want her family to break. Despite her frustration and fear, she is sensible enough to break her home and tries to rationalize the happenings. She behaves sensibly in public though she registers her protest by not wearing chiffons, her husband’s favorite. As far as possible, she
keeps her ego under check and tries to conform to her husband’s image of her looks:

My father’s ideas of a well-dressed wife were pretty fixed – she had to be draped in plastic colored chiffons worn with a sleeveless blouse. Jewelry to be restricted to a discreet row of pearls, a diamond ring, bracelet watch and small ear tops. Matching shoes and handbag were an absolute must. Also manicured nails (fingers and toes), and lacquered hair. Make up especially lipstick, was of vital importance since he firmly believed it was a sign of sophistication and no stylish woman should ever be seen without it. He also had another hand up – but here, my mother draws the line.74

This idea of conforming to one’s partner’s taste, in order to prevent the conjugal harmony from serious damage, seems to have some autobiographical shades. Ms. De’s statement in her latest book Spouse - The truth about marriage bears out the point of comparison:

My father took an active interest in my mother’s wardrobe – in fact, he brought every single saree she possessed. She wore his favorite colors (blue, pink, green) and shunned those he didn’t approve of (yellow, purple). I don’t know how she felt about wearing only those colors that pleased her husband all through their marriage (a few months short of sixty years). But I do know that without my realizing it I’m following a similar pattern. I rarely wear something, I know De does not like. For one I trust his aesthetics and know his taste. For another, I believe it’s important that your
partner enjoy the way you look unless of course
the partner has ghostly or Kinky taste in which
a line has to be drawn at the outset. 75

According to Shobha De, conforming to one’s partner’s taste is:

---the most natural thing to do. And there’s
absolutely no shame in it. Reserve your ego
battles for something more important. 76

The word ‘something’ appears to be the operative word. Most
probably, by ‘something’ she means one’s identity, dignity and
independence.

Pratimaben’s (a well-known social activist) entry in Mrs. Verma’s
life comes as the life itself. She shows her the way of living life with
self-respect. In fact Mrs. Pratimaben Shah, wife of an affluent
Ahmedabad based businessman is a free woman. She was free to explore
the world on her own terms and without anything or anyone to bind her
down. Like a mother hen she takes Mrs. Verma under her wing as she
assumed the divine role of a savior of lost souls. Pratimaben’s idea of
managing a boutique comes as a boon to Mrs. Verma. It replenishes her
with a new spirit of self-realization. Enabled by a new spirit and
confidence, she revolts against her marginal status and suppressive
surroundings. When Mrs. Verma decides to work in a boutique, Mr.
Verma furiously reacts to this idea, Mrs. Verma is blunt enough to tell
him that her determination to work was final and she was not at all
bothered about others. To quote the novelist:
I have had enough of your bullying and hypocrisy. I have kept quiet for far too long. Go to hell with your corporate nonsense. Who cares what your boss thinks? Or those bloody women think? Where were they when my world was collapsing and you were with that Sindhi whore? ----And you want me to bother about them? Why should I? Why should I bother about you either? You can also go to hell with your pompous talk and empty boasts. I am sick, do you hear; sick of living this false 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 girlfriend --- you don’t deserve me. And God knows what sins I committed in my last birth to be stuck with you. Whether you like it or not, henceforth I will make the decisions about my life. And the first one is that I’m taking a job. 77

Her protest symbolizes the protest of the new woman against male chauvinism. But it is pertinent to discuss her stance as balanced, womanist and humanistic rather than militant in nature. In fact De’s women are contemporary, urban upper middle class ladies who are not out with a sole aim to overthrow the establishment or the social system in order to grab some political power. In fact in her writings, De exposes India’s rituals, customs, hypocrisy, sexual behavior, prejudices which are used to marginalize women. This can be aptly expressed through the words of Robin Morgan:
There is something every woman bears around her neck on a thin chain of fear— an amulet of madness. For each of us, there exists somewhere a moment of insult so intense that she will reach up and rip the amulet off even if the chain tears at the flesh of her neck. We are rising, powerful in our unclean bodies, bright glowing mad in our inferior brains: wild hair flying, wild eyes staring, wild voices keening--stuffing fingers into our mouths to stop the screams of fear and hate and pity for men we have loved and love still. 78

Dependence on men for survival and the need of protection are two major aspects of marginalization of women. De is portraying a new woman who is empowered by education, independent social and economic status or a self-sufficient person is still marginalized due to the power politics in man-woman relationship.

In Sultry Days, De also presents a group of modern vain upper class women with all their faults. These women enjoy their lives without any intention of harming others lives. Sujata, the sex queen is quite a potent representative of this class. She is an important part of God’s ‘arty-forty literary circuit’, which they call ‘Anglo Indian Poets Association’. She is convinced that she has played her part as a good wife and mother and the family is grateful to her. To quote the novelist:

Sujata would play Mother Hen and gather all her chicks to her bosom—literally I was surprised to discover that Sujata had a family. A
very conventional one at that. All of them – her timid husband and four daughters, doted on her. However, she had made it plain that she had gone beyond them and that she’d stopped playing wife and mother long ago. 79

Sujata better realizes the importance of family. Once she says:

----I could easily have left and gone away so many men have longed to make me theirs. I receive marriage proposals all the time.----even now. But no. My place is in my own home. 80

God is fascinated by her personality:

She is beautiful, man just beautiful. She follows her instincts. She makes her own rules. She’s not a coward. She cares two hoots for so called ‘society’. 81

This makes her De’s ‘New Woman’.

Vimla and Manju are two corporate women just missing the label of ‘New Women’ by a generation. They are like “dragon ladies” who take their business seriously. ‘Each of them was a fearsome creature, highly, motivated, alarmingly ambitious and unbelievably ruthless’. 82 Vimla, an archetypal workaholic has an intimidating presence and lives in strong set up:

---didn’t have a single known friend. Her private life was a mystery ---a house she shared with half a dozen smelly, vile—tempered starry cats and a mentally retarded brother. Determinedly single, she referred to herself as a
'bachelor girl’ and hated it when anyone tactlessly called her a widow, which she was. 

Manju has a different personality. She is ‘voluptuous in a Punjabi sort of way, overweight, fair and flashy’. She resembles Sujata the way she handles her family exemplifying how the traditional fixations have been subverted:

---Vikki (her husband) does everything – bath-shath, breakfast, potty, dropping, fetching. He’s the one who goes for open Days, sports, dramatics, all that nonsense where do. I have the time?---The teachers in my kid’s school ask them if their parents are divorced since they’ve never seen me ----I didn’t want kids at all. But Vikki – such a buddy – he told me ‘Darling, you just bear them for 9 months that’s all. The rest is up to me.'

The transformation of Bindiya from a mother-in-law controlled bride to a new woman comes as a shock to her traditional Marwari community. The new avatar of this liberated lady is described as ‘---fool free and fancy loose ---something like that. Besides the stunning change in her looks which makes her quite a woman bursting with confidence and looking smashing. She indulges herself in the activities which testify her new found status of liberated woman.

Feroze is another young woman flouting the convention: ‘Enterprising, manipulative and full of strange kind of charm, she got around to places most people only dreamt of’ and Lesbian as she is, she ultimately marries Kiki, a popular film actress. Zainab takes
pride in being the film industry’s first unwed mother-father unknown or at least officially so overthrowing the social and moral order.

Another ‘non-conformist’ woman Pramila decides to break the secure walls of holy matrimony, just for the reason that she feels suffocated and finds the boredom unbearable. The idea of perpetual boredom of marriage seems to be sickening to her; hence she decides to reject the notions of sanctity and morality. Her idea of a satisfying life does not conform to that of her husband, Vilas. He has very conventional views about a happy woman:

As far Pramila – why she had everything a woman would 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, join the local Mahila Mandal, attend Haldi Kumkums, organize Sarvajanik Ganpati Festivals and show off her latest sari brought by him from Bombay while on ‘tour’.  

Vilas’s point of view is the product of the social mindset which represents the male hegemony. But as a new woman, she is subverting the conventions to explore her individual identity. Pramila suffers from ‘a big city hangs up’. She runs to Mumbai leaving her husband and family to save her from suffocating boredom and frustration. In Mumbai she tries to get around in ‘the right circles’ and to make ‘right moves’. Her chief aim being regarded as a ‘women of substance’, but she is accepted in the society as a nothing better than a divorced woman of bad character or even a ‘bordering whore’. Thus women in all cases are
victims of male chauvinism. A typical male attitude towards them is enshrined in Deb’s assertions that ‘once a bitch, always a bitch’ and ‘one bitch is as good as another.’

*Sultry Days* brings out the folly of accepting the slavish subjectivity of women to male dominance. It also brings out the impact of the feminine consciousness with its sustaining and pathological impact on family, community and society. Simone de Beauvoir has given a full length commentary on the plight of women today:

> The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of feminity, they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women, within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to men; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundation.  

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, on proper education of women before she can step forward or 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 and son’s whims and fancies due to lack of education. She represents the conventional marginalized woman. On the other hand, Nisha’s mother accepts painful subjugation to her husband initially but being educated she does not surrender in a meek manner to her husband’s infidelity. At first possible opportunity she reacts to her husband’s snobbery, hypocrisy and lecturing without compromising her family life. She is a typical example of a feminist in Shobha De’s doctrinaire. Her inner strength 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. That is why while God is compromised to die in harness being rejected, neglected and ignored by all his erstwhile so called liberated female acquaintances, Nisha boosts his morale single handedly when he is on death-bed and transfers much of her inner strength to him thereby making his death peaceful.

Through *Sultry Days* Shobha De asserts – while men pose to be the masters and claim to be in complete command of all situations in life, but 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 the society in general and their respective domestic lives in particular.

Life offers itself to each individual in a unique shape, size and color. How to handle it is the question that has no sure-fire answer, Still a close look at the long continuum of life enables us to generalization that there are two modes of handling it—‘dominance’ and ‘subservience’. Dominance is male prerogative and subservience is female virtue. Lately, the society has witnessed a sea change in the perception and lifestyle of people especially of women who have had enough of bullying and buckling.

**Snapshots** De’s fifth novel, speaks about the women, who have decided to refuse to continue with the conventional patterns of sexuality and gender specific roles. It also registers the reflections of the novelist on the lives of six women who were friends at Santa Maria High School as well as their environment. Swati, Aparna, Reema, Surekha, Rashmi and Noor assemble after a long time (over fifteen years) for a pleasant get together, at Swati’s behest at the house of Rima Nath. As they go over the memories of their past, they accuse one another and grow hostile and the party ends in Noor’s suicide.

The novel presents the demolition of the long established social conventions and value system, though a little overreacting.
The characters have redefined the sacred bond of marriage, discarded it over right or just denied it to their advantage. What appear sexual perversions is their sincere endeavor to come to terms with the absurdism of their environment either self-created or imposed. Nevertheless the characters grow aware of it and try their best to make the best of it.

The depiction of women’s unconventional sexual behavior becomes a significant narrative strategy of De in Snapshots. The women characters who indulge in different exhibitionist activities ultimately turn into a useful play thing for patriarchal male only. The ruling ideology that favors man prompts these women to fall prey to the designs of the patriarchal man by satisfying his voyeuristic and erotic fantasies. The different novelistic details related to the sexual union thus serve a useful purpose in the larger design of the novels as they reveal a specific aspect of feminist perspective that treats exhibitionism by women a sign of their liberation.

Aparna is married to Rohit, an architect because they had much in common – even the birth sign Gemini. However, they changed after marriage with frequent quarrels and Aparna always surrendering meekly. To quote the novelist:

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 she who expected too much, demanded too much; that men weren’t supposed to be a hundred percent honest or sincere, that it was unrealistic of her to hope for that with Rohit.  

Many a time, Rohit told her that she must not ask questions, not be so curious about his doings but just overlook details and ignore issues. Aparna trained herself to keep quite but within she was a shattered woman. She is too stunned at the changes in the behavior of Rohit after the marriage. As ignorance of her husband’s true nature, Aparna loves him and tolerates his make-believe behavior. Her belief is shattered and she expresses her disgust in following words:

I thought you were the New Man I expected you to care and share. But you’re like any other husband. The same old double standards. The same hypocrisies. 

Aparna liked men with high ideal and lofty ambitions. Men like Rohit or like her father. But soon she regrets her relationship with Rohit who let her down and left her high and dry. Women like Aparna suffer and undergo humiliation at the hands of men due to chicanery and machinations of the Swati type women. Even the novelist agrees with this assertion when she writes: Swati’s target hadn’t been Aparna’s man – it had always been and still was Aparna herself.

Another thing responsible for breaking their relationship is their mutual decision of having ‘no babies’ whether or not they could
afford it. Aparna evaluates herself. ‘Did the marriage end that day, or did it end the evening she had discovered Rohit and Swati in a suspiciously coy mood?’ Ultimately their marriage culminated in a divorce with Aparna having to hear that she was the cause of all upheavals and Rohit walked out on her with a clean cheat. In portraying Aparna-Rohit relationship Shobha De comments on the Indian culture which is basically male dominated and the woman is expected to obey his commands, whims and fancies. De also highlights the forbearance of Indian women especially through Aparna who willfully, accepts the blame and partially insinuates the hectic life of Bombay for these miseries. Perhaps, she had expected too much out of marriage. Moreover, as a working woman she had failed to give sufficient time to her home. In the moments of utter crisis she recalls her mother’s words:

Remember, a woman in our society is nothing without a husband. Study as much as you wish win prizes, get a good job. But don’t let all these things affect you, give you a big head. You may be the prime minister of India tomorrow, but when you come home, you automatically become your husband’s wife. If you forget that, you are finished. Your marriage is finished.89

At a point when she is alone and broken, Prem comes as a therapist. She needed him both at work and at play. She does not love him. But he is a coldblooded convenience to her. The fullness of her
sexual gratification helps her to accept her physically and bring her moments of self-actualization. Prem is merely a plan whom she provides some benefits in the bargain.

At reunion Reema unburdens her heavy heart recalling her marriage to Ravi, a wealthy man who provided her with all material luxuries of life, but unfortunately starving her for his much craved company. Reema leads a lonely life bringing up her only daughter Shonali or waiting for Ravi to return. Ravi is so engrossed in his money making mania that he neglects the sexual needs of his better half. Reema’s sex starvation is a great emotional strain for her. Like Aparna, Reema needs care, share and laughter also a steady, warm attentive companion. Just after six months of her marriage to Ravi Nath Reema falls into an incestuous relationship with her brother-in-law. This is due to Ravi’s impotency. On the first wedding night Reema discovers that she has been married to a wrong man, who leaves her ‘cold, physically and emotionally’. This stark reality of her conjugal life makes her morose but after going through Sridevi’s love-life, she realizes that it’s the general phenomenon of the elite and upper middle class urban facilities of the India. This emotionless sexual behavior of Ravi decides the future for Reema. Ravi was grossly mistaken in so far as he considered mere copulation as sex relationship while the cardinal factor of satisfaction in sex eluded his grasp and this forced Reema to develop amorous relationship with her brother-in-law. Reema is the best example of unfulfilment in
conjugal love having direct bearing upon her adultery. This is a tragedy of Indian women and wives which is rendered more poignant by Swati’s remarks who says ‘we marry the person we are told to marry.’

Ignorance and lack of guidance combined with curiosity and inquisitiveness about male anatomy, so common among girls with first flush of youth, propel Reema in her school days to pick up fancy for Raju, an adolescent boy still underage and the friendship eventually results into Reema’s pregnancy.

Shobha De’s feminist perspective marks the presence of a necessary activism that wants to change what happens to biological woman because of social structures of genders. In patriarchal system, it is always the male desire that acquires the dominating role. Women are oppressed by men for being female bodies. It results in commodification of female bodies. In De’s novels man’s attitude towards woman marks a sense of possession of her body only. Even in their intimate sexual experience. Men express a sense of victory for possessing the women’s body. Reema’s sexual encounter with Raju reveals – how a man treats a woman in biological terms only. The sense of victory in Raju’s eyes after making love to Reema is despised by her. After this, Reema accepts a routine and snug life with minimum risk by marrying Ravi, a rich boy from her community.
Reema and Aparna dissatisfied with their husbands, in turn adopt a pattern of life which is against the social norms. Aparna chooses the path of divorce and Reema decides not to walk out of her marriage, but to manipulate her married life. Cleverly like a shrewd and practical wife she has decided not to bother, about her husband’s ‘sex life outside their bedroom’ and ‘never to break up the home, have fun quietly somewhere. But don’t leave the family.’

Next woman protagonist in the novel is Noor. Her father is a wiry, nervous Nawab and had declared his independence from the Begum soon after the birth of their two children, Noor and Nawaz. Noor’s slavish nature is the result of her neglected childhood and indifferent parents. Her need for love and belongingness takes neurotic dimensions. Her craving for attention and care from others explains her queer behavior.

In such a hostile environment Nani, an elderly maid servant of the house brings her up but unable to guide her properly. The maid servant is helpless to protect Noor from the unscrupulous Swati and fails to save her from her incestuous brother Nawaz. Noor finds it comfortable to have sex with her own brother Nawaz; surprisingly neither of them has a sense of guilt about it. Noor is the only woman who is depicted as submissive and weak willed. That’s why she suffers a lot. She is deserted by her boyfriend Amir before she is even fully aware of their love. Her brother Nawaz commits incest with her. They both have caused deep scares on her mind. After her accident Noor loses her good
looks and to her dismay, she finds that people’s behavior also has changed a lot. During the party Noor confesses many things in her life. As they go over the memories of their past, they accuse one another and grow hostile and the party ends with Noor’s suicide.

Swati always prefers to be a victor than a victim. She lures Aparna’s husband and destroys her harmonious married life. She tries to promote her career instead of accepting security in the arms of powerful male. She describes the details of her checkered life – of how she was framed for drug involvement and went bankrupt paying for legal defense. She had to work at night clubs, do some modeling, and prostitution to support her. Finally she manages to get out of the situation out of sheer luck when she is selected to play the role of an exotic bejeweled Maharani with an insatiable sexual appetite in a television serial. On flights she meets Juan Mendonca, an eccentric millionaire, from Honduraj and goes on to spend a head spinning week in Argentina. Just before she is about to sign the biggest contract of her career, Juan proposes her for marriage. The marriage lasts only for few days and consists of bizarre love making. It soon becomes apparent that she is expected to behave like a Maharani in his company. In reality, however, she is a captive animal in Juan’s possession.

Swati, the chief protagonist and representative of today’s liberated women adores sex as celebrations. She dismisses the idea of sex as a despicable or shameful activity. Initially Swati gets married to one of her
best ‘buddie’ and recalls that he was the one who understood her best. The divorce came through not due to any extramarital affair but due to Swati’s being too “self-absorbed.”

Surekha chooses a life with the lowest risk by going for an arranged marriage at the age of nineteen when all the other girls were busy getting their degrees and enjoying themselves with college boyfriends. Surekha has no complicated views about happiness. After a gap of fifteen years she defines her happy and satisfied life to Swati. She says:

May be I am (happy). I am married. I live in a comfortable house. I have a well behaved daughter. A prosperous husband what more do I need?  

But Surekha too finds her sex life with her husband, Harsh, very boring. Harsh does not consider his wife as human being but as a material being given to routine work. His expectation from her is ‘perfectly rolled chapattis’ every day in the Tiffin supplied by the driver. She has developed very intimate relation with Dolly, her schoolmate and next door neighbour. She shares with Dolly:

her daily frustration, minor bickering with her mother-in-law, major fights with her husband, arguments with her child’s class teacher, defiance from old servants, even dissatisfaction with her sex life.  

Sharing her mechanical love experience with her husband to Dolly, Surekha quotes:
What is there? It doesn’t cost me anything I open my legs mechanically and stare at the clock on the wall across the bed. It’s all over in about 6 to 8 minutes. ⁹²

In order to fulfill her sexual needs she continues her lesbian relationship with Dolly who remains unmarried in order to maintain her lesbian relationship with Surekha. While describing their harmonious relationship, the author describes:

Their lives had become inextricably intertwined. Dolly and Surekha were like a well-adjusted happily married couple. There was no passion to deal with any longer. Just enough familiarity to provide regular comfort. ⁹³

Surekha and Reema are representatives of average Indian married women who have to bear unfulfilling relationships. Any Indian middle class housewife can identify with Reema in her conjugal experiences.

Her entire body had been tense and receptive --- clumsy coupling with arousal or a tender exploration --- she lay awake for hours beside her snaring husband. That night decided all the nights that followed. Nights that had an in built pattern and rhythm without the slightest excitement or variation. Ravi discharged his husbandly obligation – literally. And expected Reema to be satisfied if not actually grateful. Sex was never discussed – only perpetrated on the other. Like a minor war. ⁹⁴
Placed in such a situation, a woman is bound to face disillusionment; disenchantment and frustration which culminate into adopting various ways to fulfill their sexual needs like lesbianism, extramarital affairs. Surekha – Dolly’s lesbian relationship, Aparna-Prem and Reema- her brother-in-law extramarital affairs or Noor-Nawaz relationships reveals that De’s women indulge in deviant sexual behavior to challenge the accepted notions of essential female nature, and female sexuality to express their rejection of the established code for sexual behavior they experiment with different forms of sex. These women not only indulge in deviant sexual practices but also talk about sex in explicit terms. They do not express any sense of guilt or shame while discussing their life in the bedroom. Such frank expressions about sexual drives reject the sexual morality essentially ordained for women. Their reference to the sexual act in unambiguous terms shatters the traditional image of a woman that presents her as submissive, docile, clam and meek.

Almost all of the protagonists in the novel experience sex with more than one person. Their rejection of sexual morality forms a part of their challenge to patriarchal way of life that introduces certain curbs on women’s behavior. These women’s indulgence in deviant sexual behavior their attitude towards sexual morality and their use of uninhibited language marks their protest against patriarchal system. These women seem to stand by the radical feminist proposal of replacing the patriarchal way of life:
The overthrow of patriarchy requires a complete sexual revolution which would destroy the traditional taboos on homosexuality bastardy, adolescent and pre and extra marital sex – in other words there should be unrestricted sexual activity of all kinds. 95

Rashmi, the next woman character in the novel is a nymphomaniac. She was deeply in love with a wealthy Punjabi Parminder who walked out of her life ‘for a tidier new home’ after exploiting her physically, emotionally, financially and morally. Her nymphomania is not only reflected through her sexual relationship with many men like Pips, Sr. Max, Younes, Anupam and Balbir, but also by her rare attitude of vengeance. She is an unwed mother and receives a succession of men in her bed. She fails to secure a man’s love because she feels that she is not like other women who are ‘intrinsically, instinctively, intuitively dishonest.’ She reflects on how women manipulate their men in order to retain them in their lives by flirting and flattering.

The trick was to get them hooked. Become an incurable habit in their petty self-obsessed lives, get them so beholden that they thought they couldn’t live without you or more accurately – without the services only you could provide. Mediocre women used sex as food. It was the shrewd ones who used their brains. And schemed throughout their lives to hold their men, keep them enslaved. 96
She fails to understand and fix priority and keeps drifting from one man to another unmindful of her son’s future.

Men enjoy patriarchal power but accept it as if it were given to them by an external force, by nature or convention or even by women themselves rather than by an active social subordination of women going on here and now. However, De’s novels emphasize the value of equivalence of power and one can see the women’s reaction to the changing power equation. Champabai, a brothel owner in the novel realizes the significance of power in all its aspects. She guides Rashmi:

Never give yourself to any man free you, know why? Men do not value anything they get so easily. That’s why we are here to satisfy their lust not for sex but for power – power over women, power over us – you and me. If they buy your sex, pay for you they feel like kings. Give it to them with love for nothing and they will kick you in the gut.  

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 lifelong meal ticket. Divorce too has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is but compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go.
Thus, *Snapshots* catalog many women with diverse marital status and attitudes towards matrimony ranging from outright rejection of it to meek submission to the traditional bond of matrimony. Reema and Surekha are married women living a secure life with their ‘prize catch in the community’, husbands rich enough to fulfill their needs. Rashmi rejects the idea of marriage and lives as an unwed mother with her bastard son Pips. Swati is a divorcée and still has friendly terms with her former husband. Similarly Aparna also lives a liberated life and is prepared not to get for a marriage again. She hates the awful word husband. Noor remains maiden and dies unmarried at the end of the novel.

Incidentally all young ladies at this gathering accuse men for their miseries. Rashmi feels that basically, all men are bastards, 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.

De with perfect psychological insight has deftly utilized this story to comment upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women 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 the blame on the woman in the end. While describing the married lives of the school friend, De explores love not only as a basic human emotion but also as an important aspect of man-woman relationship. The pressure of work leaves man incapable of the finer emotions and ultimately the marital relationships peters out into just a mechanical man-woman relationship. She pinpoints the basic reason for marital break down – the absence of emotional unity. The women, the victims of estrangement develop inner fragmentation leading to a split personality and psychic disorders. Thus love in De’s novels is depicted as an important factor in the individual’s self-quest with a stern note of caution that it could be destructive force when it is considered only as of physical expression.

A society may be progressive apparently advocating women’s liberation but beneath the surface a woman’s status remains unchanged everywhere. She has to encounter solitude, acerbity, frustration and alienation in a male dominated value structure. Shobha De has dealt with this theme in most of her novels with the recurrent inference that familial and societal maladjustments lead to inner fragmentation thereby forcing women to seek emotional outlet elsewhere.

De’s feminist position offers no permanent solutions to women’s problems. Her central concern seems to be limited to show
different forms of women’s subjugation and their exploitation. The women characters in her fiction make frenetic efforts to contest their marginalized position in society. But it does not form any replacement model for all. So the women characters tend to make individualistic attempts. The variety of women’s nature and their forms of life fail to adopt an all pervasive system. The responses and behavior of different women problematise women’s existence. De herself admits the complexity informing women’s position in India that does not allow the acceptance of any monolithic view of life. She says:

   The whole question of the position of females in India is so wonderfully confused that it’s impossible to take any one stand on it.\textsuperscript{98}

Thus the plurality of experiences presented in her fiction makes her fiction thematically rich and complex. The presence of multiple voices in De’s novels generally informs the ways of protest and the types of behavior adopted by various women characters to resist their subjugation.

In \textit{Second Thoughts} instead of presenting explosive and aggressive female behavior, De concentrates on exploring the different ways in patriarchy that constantly remain active in silencing woman’s voice and place her on margin. The novel successfully brings out the plight of woman who is cornered in a maze of domestic chores and
ignored by her husband. She takes bold and unconventional steps to protect her identity.

Maya, the central protagonist is a charming textile designer with a dream of becoming journalist and changing the world. She is fascinated by Bombay. When she meets Ranjan, a foreign returned rich Bombay boy, she is more excited at the prospect of settling in Bombay, the city of her dreams. She considers herself a luckiest girl in her locality. The prologue tells us much about their pre-marriage scenario. Maya with her mother came to Bombay to meet Ranjan. During their first formal meeting they liked each other. Mrs. Mallik, Ranjan’s mother decides:

    We wanted the right girl, educated yes but not one of these over ambitious career women without a care for their homes. I think we’ve made right choice in Maya.99

Ranjan is a competitive, brilliant, foreign-educated man. But he is dehumanized and obsessed with his mother. He is completely self-absorbed, remote and disconnected. However, Maya is a sensible and sensitive woman. So after her marriage Maya makes every possible effort to serve her husband. But Ranjan being short-tempered and suspicious starts finding faults in her. Thus, soon after her marriage Maya begins to receive surprises and shocks. The first thing which surprises her is that inspite of being educated in foreign country, Ranjan is very conservative. His conservative-cum-patriarchal view sabotages the spirit of Maya. He restrains her from doing a job:
I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman’s duty to run a good home.¹⁰⁰

Secondly she is shocked by Ranjan’s practically nonexistent sex drive. After two weeks of their marriage, they go for four days clumsy sex- honeymoon at a depressing hotel in Mahabaleshwar. He looks at his wife in an almost brotherly gesture and feels ‘a little repulsed’ by Maya’s nearness. He prefers to stick with men and avoids women because of his failures with six girls he’d tried to make love to. He even does not care for her emotions. These things disconcert and deslabilize Maya. Out of frustration, she thinks she will not be mother in future. She feels hurt by Ranjan’s detached attitude towards her.

Moreover Ranjan’s mother has a strong hold on him and is quite dominating. He performs his routine as per her mother’s instructions. His mother calls him twice in a day. Ranjan does not even allow Maya to know the content of his conversation with his mother. He does not even disclose any official or business matters to her. He is actually a skeptical person who thinks that no one to be trusted in Bombay. He does not take her for outing and does not permit her to be mixed with other people. Her life is confined to the four walls of their flat. She has ample material things, but deprived of emotional and physical needs, so she feels like a caged bird.
Ranjan fails to understand that mere material things can build a house not a home. As he said:

I don’t understand you, Maya what’s your problem? You live in a comfortable decent house there’s no shortage of money. I treat you well. You have all the time in the world to just lull around in bed, if you want to I hardly make any demand. I even eat whatever you give.\textsuperscript{101}

In reality he keeps her movement in check by different ways. Though he provides a decent house to live in, he imposes certain restrictions on her movement. She is not free to get out. She even can’t use STD facility to call her parents as it is locked. She can’t even use AC or TV as per her needs. Her life is controlled and commanded by her husband. Ranjan feels tiring to watch his wife around him. That’s why the kitchen had become symbolic of Maya’s refuge. She never felt wanted or welcomed in the bed room. That remained Ranjan’s room, his domain. He lectures Maya on the virtues of sacrifice when she gives him a few hundred rupees, she has received from her mother. Her feeling of unwantedness can be reverted by the following quote:

Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought. He belonged to his mother. It was unlikely that I would bear children who would belong to me. And I didn’t have a single true friend to call my own.\textsuperscript{102}

Thus, Maya is reduced to the level of an object in her own home and craves for belongingness. Her suffering, subjugation,
isolation and deprived condition aggravate her confusion. She is unable to take any decision. During this period of her life, Nikhil enters in her life. Nikhil, a teenager and Mumbai Boy is the only son of Dipankar, a colleague of Ranjan at bank. He notices her sufferings and the need of companion. With systematic efforts and persuasion Nikhil takes the advantage of Maya’s helplessness and wins over her heart. Initially she avoids his advances. But when she is convinced that after taking initiation in sex matters also Ranjan is not responding her properly, she starts to think of Nikhil. She also knows that friendship with Nikhil is the violation of marital sanctity and moral code of conduct.

Nikhil’s presence lifts up the spirits of Maya to such an extent that she becomes careless about everything. Though Maya enjoys her relationship with Nikhil, she always feels disgusted, shameful and guilty about it, since the very beginning. When Ranjan left the town for ten days, Maya felt relieved. Instead of missing him she wonders – she is feeling relaxed. Thus her relationship with Nikhil is a kind of protest against the traditional concept of Indian wife. When Maya comes to know about Nikhil’s engagement, she breaks up with him. In conformity with the traditional pattern of Indian life, Maya returns to her husband and their monotonous world. But she knows that she had already set her marriage bond on fire by enjoying herself in those minutes of forbidden pleasure with Nikhil. Thus De realistically points to the traditional ways of life of a
common Indian woman who is taught to conform and preserve the pious bond of matrimony. Maya apparently conforms to the norms of society, but secretly breaks them when she finds them unjust and unacceptable.

Ironically enough, Nikhil is no less than Ranjan so far as patriarchy pampered male behavior is concerned. Ranjan is indifferent to Maya’s physical and emotional needs and causes great agony to her. On the other hand, Nikhil exploits Maya’s suppressed and marginalized position. Maya’s false belief that Nikhil holds the promise of a happy and joyful future based on equality and understanding is shattered in the end. The novelist seems to imply by this incident that extramarital relations and sexual escapades in no way can be considered a solution to the problem of oppressed and subjugated women. A permanent alternative solution remains elusive.

The patriarchal way of life with its long history has constantly hammered certain ideas down in the minds of men and women. It becomes extremely difficult for women, in spite of their awareness, that this system works against their independent existence, that it designs against their strong efforts to free themselves from the control of the established patriarchal system. The functioning of these overbearing though seemingly invisible, has been artistically and emphatically illustrated by De in *Second Thoughts* in particular and all her other novels in general. The presentation of these
elements has a decisive role in structuring the narrative. For example, the recurrence of a particular challenge to patriarchal male in De’s fictional design is also accompanied by the rebel women’s ultimate desire to have a male companion. This female desire brings out modern women’s typical state of indecision. The modern woman is striving to be free, to be absolutely self-reliant, but then the timidity and defiance, the product of the year’s slavish and protected life pattern, causing a big hurdle.

A significant aspect of the feminist narrative stance conspicuously present in De’s fiction is the exposition of the subtleties of male behavior that tends to marginalize and suppress women’s existence. The insensitive and inconsiderate nature of self-absorbing men has been most emphatically presented in Maya’s subjugation in Second Thoughts. The husbands in De’s fiction avoid violence to keep women under control. They rather show such kind of indifference and unresponsive attitude towards women that their life becomes a real hell. The tactful ways in which men subjugate women cannot be wedged out of male behavior simply by framing laws favoring women. De’s stance in this context seems to hint at the much needed change in the typical patriarchal attitude of men. However, the presentation of different dimensions of female subjugation and suppression, and women’s varied experiences to mark their protest and resistance enriches the narrative and develops into a useful narrative strategy compatible with the
novelist’s typical stance. Marginalization is an attempt to discover and analyze Shobha De’s concern in her novels. Her novels delineate the awakening of woman’s consciousness which implies her to strive for liberation and self-actualization in an absurd and oppressive world. This awakened consciousness of woman stands for the human effort to be a whole human being regardless of difference in gender, caste, and religion. She raises her voice against the prescriptive conditions of socio economic environment that stifle a human being if she refuses to conform to its system of values.
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