

TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN SHOBHA DE'S *SISTERS*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses the Treatment of Women characters in Shobha De's *Sisters* which focuses on the elite, upper class women and it brings to the fore their stresses and strains, as they face up to the challenges of transition of Indian society from tradition to modernity. Shobha De, in her novels mirrors the upper-class urban milieu, particularly that of women. In all her novels she focuses her artistic camera on the inner conflict experienced by women in the traditional Indian society. The female protagonist in De's *Sisters* is intelligent but queer as well. She longs for smoothing, but when the husband vetoes it, through she desires it, she takes it calmly and stoically. Acceptance seems to be the 'watchword' for women. In her own 'privacy of the self' she has learnt to accept life and takes hold of it in the end.

Complete Paper

Shobha De is a well-known Indian woman novelist of the twenty-first century. She had taken on many roles, a super model journalist and best-selling author. Her career started with her unplanned entry as a teenager into the glamorous world of modeling, then moving on the magazine editing-columnist, TV script writer and author. Most of the Indian writers especially women deal with the themes of the family, career, recognition of the self and marriage. Shobha De a modern woman novelist recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts of turn this pattern upside down through her works. She is an individual version in particular period of time, place, and social environment. De's work is a revolt against society and social norms laid down to underestimate women. Her women are trying to seek self-fulfillment through self-actualization. This new socio-urban culture is eating into the narrow of Indian tradition and ethos. *Sisters* which deals with the fast emerging urban culture and its evil, is a piece

of literature with absorbing narrative, well-knit plot, dramatic structure rich in images and psychological realism in characterization and intense individual awareness of self and social predicament.

Shobha De was born in an upper middle class family in 1948 to a district judge from small town Maharashtra, and was educated in Delhi and Bombay. She had her graduation in Psychology from St. Xavier's College, Bombay. She started her earnings at first as a model much against the wishes of the father in the late sixties. She adopted a career in journalism in 1970 in which profession she found her roots for success and became the editor of three popular magazines, *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity* consulting editor to *Sunday* and *Megacity*. With her industry, she reaped name and fame as a freelance writer and columnist for several upfront magazines and newspapers. After a painful incompatible marriage with Sudhir, she took divorce from him. Later, she married Dilip De, a shipping magnate, with whom she has been living in Bombay with her six children. Even at the age of sixty-two, she is still active with abundant energy and is pursuing her career as a writer with tremendous vitality.

Shobha De novels are new forms of feminist approaches in expression, cross cultural description and multi dimension. The disintegration of family is the focus of Shobha De's characters, who takes bold step into the fictional world by her Characters, who break traditional customs and religious faith and from traditional family ways to the light of modernity. The importance of female characters is portrayed through the process of introspection and self-realization. They make a paradigm shift from traditional values to modern values. Shobha De's women characters are very good specimens which openly establish that reversal of roles are indeed possible for women in the present day society.

Shobha De is portraying the destiny of women and their exploitation, the writer tries to comprehend human exigencies through the helplessness of women. However it is difficult to ignore her concern for the predicament of women. A woman is marginalized not only on the basis of gender but also on the basis of her class and caste. Women's function in the society is primarily one of negation; their marginalized position in the male dominated world enfeebles and silences them. Women have been marginalized

since time immemorial, they have faced gender discrimination inside their houses and in society at large the conservative patriarchal society is based on male domination of women. De's novels protest against discrimination and present the good and ideal image of woman. She writes about fair sex and gives graphic depiction of their pursuits and attitudes. They cry against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied freedom and forced to act at the whims and wishes of their husbands. In fact, in doing so, she invites criticism from the orthodox Indian society too.

Shobha De's novels portray women with so much vigour and talent. But they are not compliant, leading a life of their own, aggressively violating the patriarchal norms of society. De has projected the new woman as challenging and confident in the pursuit of achieving her desired goal. In this journey, she is in the fore front in order to change the socially approved image of woman. Some critics rank Shobha De amongst the first to explore the world of urban woman in India. Although the traditional Indian society controls women to express their opinions about sex, De's women have courage to raise their voice against the conventions of society. Bhaskar A. Shukla in his article, "Shobha De: The Writer and Feminism" states that "Shobha De's women are free about their sexual expression. They will not tolerate infidelity on her on the part of their husbands. All sexual taboos are broken by them with gusto" (*Indian English Literature 211*).

Shobha De's women characters show vitality in having sufficient stamina to rebel against male chauvinism. They never bow down in meek subordination. They assert their actions though they are objected by their male counterparts. Pratibha Gupta in her article, "A Social Semiotic Study of Narratives" observes:

De's style depicts new women in a mood of revolt. It undermines the old mythologies of gender relationships by questioning and revising them. They are challenging the stereotypes, fairy tales, traditions and histories that are prescribed plots of their lives and estimates their authority and power. She is now like a released, long blocked river sweeping away

everything coming her way. And very often it has devastating effect on the society. (*Reflections on Indian English Fiction* 35)

Shobha De has awakened the spirit of new woman to realize her potential to face and challenge any sort of obstacle, turns up in her chosen path. Dr. Ashish Gupta in “The Androgynous World of New Women in Shobha De’s Fiction” asserts: “De has designed an atmosphere where woman is not living as a victim but not a victor. In her works, she has advocated rebellious sort of woman ready to revolt against established social taboos which tie her to behave as passive one and always be subjugated by man’s authority” (4). In order to present this class of women, De depicts the negative side of struggles in fulfilling her aspirations.

Though Shobha De at the initial stage of her career wrote racy or raunchy fiction with spicy narration, she struggles hard to wipe out that image in her later works. As she has emerged as a writer in the nineteen-nineties, she follows the genre of that age, what according to Jasbir Jain who has asserted the role of women writers in his article, “Towards the 21st Century: The Writing of the 1990’s” saying: “To come out of the postcolonial phase would automatically mark a shift in relationships, transforming then from dependent, subordinate ones to self-confident and equal ones” (23). She has presented sex in her novels liberally which shocks the traditional Indian masses.

Shobha De’s *Sisters*, draws, our attention neither to the aristocrats of high social circles nor to the glamorous world of Bombay film industry, but to the fabulous and intriguing corporate world of business tycoons. The engrossing tale of two beautiful, wealthy and warring sisters is brought up by her in the novel. Inhabiting the corrupt world of big business, women play for very high stakes and are driven by ambition, lust, greed, and hate.

Mikki and Alisha who remain isolated from each other as their father, by virtue of his promiscuity, choose to get them from different women. Mikki is the daughter of a woman whom Seth Hiralal properly weds while Alisha is the offshoot of his unbridled

passion with a whore, Mikki grows up in Luxury and comfort, she possess whatever a girl can hope for. Alisha, on the other hand lives a life of deprivation and scarcity in the suburbs of Bombay despite being the daughter though an illegitimate one, of the business tycoon Seth Hiralal. As a result, she appears to be hostile and bitter to the entire world, especially to her dead father and his legitimate daughter, Mikki. She appears upset as her father's death means no possibility of her going to America. She hardly seems aggrieved at having lost her creator. She reacts sharply at having been ignored by the newspaper reporting her father's death.

She sheers at herself and her mother existing as an 'open secret' in her father's life. She slams the door of her bedroom and curses everyone including her dead father. But like a determined and tough girl, she makes up for the loss. She sets out to make sure that the 'open secret' was made 'official' now as she prepares to go to "Shanti Kutir as Seth Hiralal's other daughter the one he fathered but never acknowledged." It is interesting to note that Alisha does not intend to go to the Shanti Kutir to mourn her dead father but to grab forcefully what she does not get lawfully. She seems upset and furious and prepares to take on her adversities. Thus, De's *Sisters* helps us to understand how one of the protagonists is going to take on her male counterparts including her father. These girls won't lead an existence the circumference of which the other, especially males, decide.

Both Alisha and Mikki refuse to sulk and appear subdued in order to look so domesticated. Both these girls continue to indulge in their single minded pursuit which is to lead a life of luxury, wealth, comfort, and pleasure, a perception quite alien to those women who seek a heavenly bliss in the domestic duties and prefer to reveal in a spiritual illusion rather than chasing a material reality. After her father's decease, Mikki is overburdened with responsibility of her father's entire business which is unfortunately running in loss. She knows the status of her father's industry. She says to Ramankaka, a confidante 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 emphatically, declares:

Thank you for your advice, Rammankaka, I appreciate and value your
 words. But I'd like you to hear a few of Mine now. I can't change my
 Sex, unfortunately, That is the one Thing all of you will have to accept.
 But I can change just about everything else . . . and I intend
 to. . . I don't expect you or the others to give up your prejudices –
 but I want you to know that I will not let that stand in my way. (30)

Mikki Challenges the usual orthodox ideas of a society which considers women subdued, not eligible to do any creative work. Her determination is to save her father's companies at any cost; that is why, on the suggestion of her cousin; she becomes ready to borrow finance from her fiancé, Navin. But when she realizes Navin's incapacity to respond to her wish, without any care of social rules and any sense of guilt, she breaks off her engagement with him.

Social rules have always been harsh for women. A man, as an independent, is justified by society to have extra-marital affairs. Her desire for sexual relationship is subordinated to the interest of society not on her individual feeling. De's women are not hesitant to live a licentious life. Both the heroines of the novel Mikki and Alisha have sexual relationship with whom they like without any care of codes of conduct and social boundaries. Alisha, one of the protagonists of *Sisters* has crossed the pool of sexual conventionality without any social or moral intuitions. There is explicit description of her sexual encounters with different men. Depicting sex in such elaborate details, De seems to shake the orthodox or conventional pattern of society. Shobha De herself says: "I don't know why there is so much of noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex" (11). These heroines are not ready to obey these superficial social rules, which are made by man for women. In her novels, her woman is daring to have extra-marital links to overcome their mental fatigue.

Mikki is loyal to her husband and marriage, she does not believe in the subordination of women. As a progressive and pragmatic lady, she does not want to confine herself within four walls of a house, but being a representative of this rigorous social system, Binny does not allow her to work outside. Mikki is ready to be an ideal

wife but Binny as a stony hearted man treats her only for his benefits. She is fair and square in her dealing but never desires to fall a prey to Binny's unusual desires but when the questions of her personal freedom is raised before her. She becomes ready to break her marriage avoiding the antique values. She does not want to succumb to her husband unwanted whims.

Women of this new hyper-modern group care little for men. They consider men only a means to get to their desired ends. The new woman is all set to turn the table upside down and all notions of respectability and morality are sent crashing down the drain. Neena Arora in her article, "An Analytical study of *Sisters*" says: "The plot sounds good, rather perfect for a super-hit Hindi formula film with well measured doses of suspense, romance, imported locates, sex, drugs, accidents, rape and love-hate relationship finally ending on a happy note" (*The Fiction of Shobha De, 218*). Though the novel has followed the hit formula of a Hindi movie, the tumult which Mikki faces has shown the stamina of woman in the business world in comply with the ebbs and tides of societal problems.

A woman of independence means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go. The trap of total dependency has caged so many unhappy. Women are no longer unwilling to come down. She lives with a man not because she has to, but because she wants to. It certainly represents a big step forward. A middle class working woman has the extra marital affairs, and Tarini has also indulged herself in such type of relationship beyond marriage. Her final triumph comes when she wins the love and affection of her half-sister Alisha who pined for legitimacy is life but failed because her father had no guts to own her in public. De brings these two women together, who blundered their way for a while and turned their mutual distrust to love and affection passing the bounds of social restriction. The novel is appropriately titled *Sisters*.

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