

# Sufferings of Women in the Patriarchal Society: A Study of Shobhaa De's *Sisters*

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## Abstract:

Shobhaa De is well known for her writings. Her writings always deal with women's problems in the society. She focuses mainly on the modern society as well as the various elements of the urban Indian society. De never fails to portray the large society through her characters in every work of hers. Love and envy are the prominent themes of her works. De's women characters are inevitably strong. So they are always ready to raise against the taboos established in the society, as these taboos make women submissive. The present study entitled **Sufferings of Women in the Patriarchal Society: A Study of Shobhaa De's *Sisters*** discusses the life experiences of two sisters, namely Mikki and Alisha and it also portrays how women are dominated in the society.

**Keywords:** Self-actualisation, Weariness, Interference, Ridiculous, Hypocritical System, Flirtatious, Hostile.

In the male dominant society, women are being considered as an object in the society. In *The Second Sex*, Simon De Beauvoir says that:

This has always been a man's world... History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of independence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. (93-171)

The issues of a woman in this patriarchal society is, in the beginning of her life, she is the asset of her father who decides her life partner (the next man) to control her. So, a woman being trapped in the male dominated society strives hard to expose herself powerfull and also she cannot speak of her feelings, since no man is ready to understand her rights. In the patriarchal society, women have to either struggle or adjust with the unjust society. Shobhaa De's woman characters try to find self-fulfilment through self-actualisation. De desires to rebuild the established social theory regarding women. De wants men to know women's power of destruction. In *Sisters*, De has focused on strong women who work with confidence.

*Sisters* is a tale of two young women, namely Mikki and Alisha. They want to live on their wish, since they do not want to restrict themselves.

The novel *Sisters*, begins with Seth Hiralal and his wife, Mikki's parents' death in the air crash. After their death, Mikki is overloaded with the responsibilities of her father's business which has been running in loss. As a girl, Mikki has no right to enjoy in public places. But she is not ready to follow the conventional ideas the society has imposed on women, since the society does not allow women to do any work creatively. Mikki decides to get financial help from her fiancé, Navin. After knowing Navin's incapability, Mikki breaks up with him. These words show her self-assured and strong view towards life: "Cheer you. It is not the end of the world, you know. We'll find someone else to help us out..." (82). These lines portray Mikki's self-confidence. De's women characters do marry to live their life to its fullest. When they find out that their marriage does no longer give them happiness, they do not prefer to live silently like other traditional women. In the treatment of characters, De is certainly interested in portraying the psyche of female protagonists who lead their life alone.

Mikki's young life is full of weariness and heart breaks. Mikki always wants to create an identity for her. Mikki craves for love and affection. Until she goes to America for higher studies, she feels lonely in the absence of love and affection. Back in India, Alisha, Mikki's half-sister; Navin, Mikki's lover Navin and later Binny Malhotra, Mikki's husband creates an atmosphere that denies love to Mikki. They give her stress either by interference or indifference. There are some people who are selfish, disloyal and narrow minded like Ramanabhai to spoil her career. When Mikki is in Boston, she enjoys freedom and her friends' love. The dreadful reality of her situation hits her hard, as she is the only child and sole survivor of her parents and their business. She has to give up her secure life of Boston and settle in India. Soon she realises that she has nobody around to support and protect her. Mikki is highly intensed to leave for America and she does not care about its consequences.

The novel also shows Mikki's unsentimental reaction to her parents' death ever after seeing their body lying in front of her. From Mikki's reactions to Alisha, Navin, Binny, Ramanabhai, Shanay and every other character in the novel, Shobhaa De has Mikki as a loveable lady, with unconditional love for others and also she is known for her remarkable honesty. Her actions never contribute to the mere passion for money or luxury. Her calm response to her parent's death has various reasons. Her education and cultural refinement has taught her to be controlled and focused in handling emotional situation. The truth is Mikki's parents failed to show their love that is strong enough to move her from her sorrows. Mikki longed for parental care and affection which was not satisfied. So, her response to the loss of her parents is honest enough. Usually recollections of any child regarding her parents will be full of nostalgia with deep sorrow. But, Mikki has no such memories. Regarding her father,

She remembered how he'd inspect her mother thoroughly before stepping out for a party, often asking her to change her saree, or replace an old hand bag with new one. She also had distinct memories of him subjecting her to a similar scrutiny often reprimanding her for dirty fingernails or for wearing ill-matches socks with her English shoes. (15)

Mikki only remembers his scrupulous taste. She considers him as an aesthete, who responds to beauty, music, flowers and sunset but he has not given her any sweet memories of love. Hiralal, Mikki's father was not cruel, but he thought that the material provisions and the social status that he had given his daughter were far enough. Mikki tells Amy, "I wanted to admire my father and never could..." (124). In Mikki's opinion Maltiben, her mother, was not a tender loving mother. But she was a status-conscious aristocrat. She does not have any memories of intimate moments with her mother, to cherish after their death. Once, Mikki desired to wear silver toe-rings, her mother refused it, telling that silver toe-rings were meant only for servants. The few summer holidays enjoyed in Europe, America, Japan and Africa are still fresh in her memory, but those trips were with her father's business partners. She admits that she has rarely seen her father in a casual and relaxed mood at home. She feels sad that her "hours of glory" at school, moved unrecognised and unappreciated by her parents.

Even after their death, she has not forgiven her parents for their money-making minds and for not understanding their only daughter's emotional needs. When her parents failed to attend her school function, Ramanabhai said that: "I thought you needed a parent..." (11). Keeps on echoing in her ears still. Mikki makes herself to be an ideal wife of Binny Malhotra who treats her only for her benefits. Binny rejects Mikki's love. She loves him deeply and thinks that her husband is hers. This makes the readers to feel that marriage makes husband and wife really fall for each other. But Binny does not have such feelings for her. His attitude towards her is that of a dominant male and he treats her as his slave. When Binny talks about women, he says that, "In our family women are trained to obey their husband .... You will never I repeat, never question me or complain where I go, what I do, when and with whom is my business says that: .... Your job is to look beautiful" (116).

The story describes another stage of womanhood. As a married woman, Mikki wishes to give birth to a child and also she finds that she is pregnant. But Binny doesn't want her to have child. He insists her to abort the child. Being offended, she says that, "I was so stunned... I started crying, din the want our child? And he bellowed No! No! No! He told me to arrange for an abortion. When I refused he said it was to frighten me when I heard that horrible word! Where would I go?" (119).

Mikki is helpless to fight the male dominance. When she hears a phone call that Binny died in an accident, her friends tell her not to attend the funeral. But Mikki as a true Indian wife mourns: "Absent myself? What non sense? He was my husband" (169). Though she suffers in loneliness, she finds her

relatives Anjanben, Ganga, Dhondu and other servants ridiculous. They are altogether at a different wavelength from her. Mikki never feels attached with her aunts and uncles. The hypocritical system of the community has no promises of true affection or friendship. Social ceremonies and ethics, even funeral gatherings, in rich societies are converted into extended gossip sessions. And Mikki is not able to make herself one among such a social set up. Social rules have always been harsh for women.

De's women do not hesitate to live a immoral life. Mikki comes to know about her sister Alisha who is the daughter of her father's unrevealed family. Alisha has crossed the pool of sexual conventionality without any social or moral feelings. Mikki tries her best to have a productive bond with Alisha. But Alisha is not at all good to Mikki. Alisha insults Mikki literally. This reveals in Alisha's statement: "Do we? I don't need you baby. If you need me, it will be on my terms" (26). But Mikki believes that the love of Alisha will strengthen her soul and put an end to her feeling of isolation. Mikki's decision to establish a relationship with Alisha becomes Mikki's chosen mission. But Alisha, who is a timid and lovable young woman, leads a flirtatious life. Alisha appears as an angry young woman. The contrast between two sisters gives a dramatic touch to the narrative. For Alisha, money gives identity and is more important than any human relations. To Mikki, blood relations are more valuable than wealth. The contrast between two sisters is the most important aspect in the growth of the plot of the novel. Alisha never misses any occasion to insult her sister Mikki. Once again Mikki is denied love and affection. Mikki begs tearfully for Alisha's friendship, nothing else. At one stage, Alisha is hospitalized and needs blood. Mikki gives her blood and triumphs over the hatred of Alisha. Ironically Mikki and Alisha are united.

In the novel, Shobhaa De has also depicted the breaking of the institution of marriage. Man and woman do not become one in marriage; they merely become partners in love. Shobhaa De tries to save her protagonists, Mikki by making her deeply human. Through sufferings, Mikki learns the art of living. Her final accomplishment comes when she wins the love and affection of her half-sister Alisha, as she failed, because her father had no guts to own her in public. The novel is appropriately titled as *Sisters*. Shobhaa De's women have "symbolised the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality and characterized the modern age". In *Sisters*, the moment one looks at Mikki and Alisha, knows that these girls won't lead a life which others decide to lead. Mikki is the woman who responds resistantly to a patriarchal society and Alisha is the girl who is openly hostile and violent. Shobhaa De's novels show that novelist's portrayal of the secret depths of the human psyche; her accurate characterisation, and her captivating style which appeal to realistic images insist the reader to identify him or herself with the characters and situation. Shobhaa De has tried her best to expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society in which unlucky and abandoned woman longs for love and pleasure and wants to fly freely in the sky of freedom.

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