

The Image Of New Woman: A Study of Shoba De's Select Novels

¹ Goldy Balbeer Kaur
¹Telangana University, Telangana, India

Abstract : The proposed study seeks to provide a modest study of the novels of the most popular Indian Woman writer in English, Shobha De from the perspective of the image of new woman. It attempts to make comprehensive critical comments on her fiction with an emphasis on the image of new woman portrayed in her select novels. The study also aims at the exploration of the versatile personality of Shobha De.

I. Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective

This proposed study is a sober attempt to study the evolution of new woman in India after the partition. In India, the situation was entirely different from the West. Indian woman was subjugated since ages. She was under the authority of man. Medieval India was not women's age and it was supposed to be the 'dark age' for them. The Hindu moral code known as "The Laws of Manu" denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband. Since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 'Rajmohan' Wife in 1864, a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy.

When looking at these narratives, one can say that silence and tolerance were the main tools with women to live under patriarchal hegemony. In Indian patriarchal society, a husband was considered God, however, cruel and indifferent he may be. She had been taught since her childhood that she has to obey her husband and family. Her parents offered her no chance to think about her identity. Different factors were responsible for woman subjugation. They can be categorized as social, cultural, traditional, and so on. Culture and society had imposed many kinds of norms on her and she was supposed to follow them religiously, she did not have the right to cross the "Laxaman Rekha". Many foreign conquests resulted in the decline in women's status. The Muslim invaders brought with them their own culture. For them, woman was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she did not have any will of her own.

This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. The Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. Polygamy was a norm for these invaders and they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "harems". So, in order to protect themselves, Indian women started using 'Purdah', (a veil), which covers body. Owing to this reason their freedom was lost. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be protected from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Sexism is the major factor responsible for female subjugation in the society. In Indian society the birth of a girl child is not welcome. Sexual abuse and flesh trade are growing evils which threaten the existence of women.

A. Start of Wave of Feminism in India with Post-Colonial Novelists

In the post-colonial era, the portrayal of women in Indian novel in English underwent a radical change. The conventional ideal woman who meekly tolerated traditional, domestic and sexual oppression and whose mouth was muzzled, voice arrested and movements fettered by patriarchal norms and control, was replaced by the "new woman" who started resisting traditions, orthodox concepts and values. Western feminism sought to change human consciousness about male dominance.

B. Impact of Freudian Theories of Psychoanalysis on Post-Colonial Writers

The conspicuous feature of the Indian fiction written after the post-world war is the deflation of self. The psycho-analytical theories of self, devaluation of self, neurosis, sexual repression and nausea given by Dr Karen Horney in Neurosis and Human Growth (1950) and Freud in Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (1953-1957), published in three volumes, impacted greatly on the post-colonial writers such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor and Rupa Bajwa.

As a writer, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices "the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments" [3]. Being

a woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life.

Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of the women of Bharati Mukherejee who are seen caught in the flux of conventional and contemporary.

Shashi Deshpande focuses on the working of psyche of her female characters. They desperately struggle to assert their individuality. Sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions. Namita Gokhale through her five novels depicts the struggle of women against the patriarchal norms that tries to suppress and extinguish her identity.

II. Socialite Evenings

In Socialite Evenings, the women characters are non-conformists. Anjali and Karuna are women who have left their conventional Indian middle class homes in search of freedom – a freedom which is not bound by any rule, a freedom unlimited and overflowing. They are ambitious and daring. They marry for convenience and are little bothered about what type of person their man will turn out to be in the long run or how long their marriage will last. They feel no scruples in fixing up extra marital connections even when their marriages are intact.

Anjali marries Abe (Abas Tyabji) for he is rich and so could give her all the luxury that she had dreamt of. Anjali knew beforehand that Abe had a wild reputation with women. Anjali is unhindered; to her Abe is the golden egg-laying goose. She even procures young virgins for Abe's sexual satisfaction. Anjali is not at all jealous when Abe takes a new girl to bed. These are like routine work and Anjali is used to it.

Anjali has her own set of lovers. Like her husband she is equally reckless in her sexual behaviour. She develops illicit relationship even with a very young boy who, age-wise, could well be her son but the affair ends in a disaster. She picks up another affair, this time with a Frenchman. After it too ends disastrously she marries Kumar, a gay who has plenty of money. Life to Anjali means only men and money.

Karuna too leads a wild, reckless life ever since she comes out of her strictly traditional, middle class home. Much against the wishes of her father, she joins the shunned world of modeling. With Anjali as her mentor she plunges into the wild glossy world of an upper social circle in Mumbai. Like Anjali, Karuna too marries for money. But her dreams are tarnished because her husband turns out to be a typical Indian male who has little consideration for the wishes of his wife. In desperation Karuna picks up her husband's friend Krish to satisfy her sexual urges. She openly goes with Krish for a holiday in Venice. This is an unthinkable step to any self respecting Indian woman of conservative background. She gets divorce from her husband and takes up a career in advertising. She succeeds in carving out a niche for herself in this competitive world. She becomes financially independent and this becomes her extra asset to flirt unlimited. She involves herself with Ranbir Roy, a much-married journalist.

To these women marriage and family do not count. All is for convenience and fun. All they crave for is unlimited liberty. This is the image of the new woman that De creates in her novels. Urbasi Barat "From Victim to Non-Victim: Socialite Evenings as a Version of *Kunstlerroman*" *The Fiction of Shobha De*, 2000. Print [8].

In this book, Ms. Urbashi discusses how Shobha De is a trend setter. She becomes the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as these strokes to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism.

It is concluded that all above mentioned critical books, research papers and articles do not address to the issue discussed in the paper. There is no elaborate work on the evolution and emergence of new woman in the post partition era. Hence the present study "Image of New Woman: A study of Shobha De's select Novels" will add a new milestone in the history of literary criticism.

III. Starry Nights, Sisters and Strange Obsession

The researcher here has explored the new women presented in the select novels of Shobha De. All domains of her growth, social, political and psychological remain the focus of the study. The new image of women presented by the novelist under study is ambitious, lustful, power hungry and bold. They use sex as weapon to win and mould men to their viewpoint and get the better of them. This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations or divorce are no longer considered to be a taboo. The concept of ideal Indian woman has become out-dated. A modern woman is career-oriented because she knows

that it is her economic dependence which empowers a male to dominate his wife and subject her to physical and mental torture.

A. Emergence of New Urban Woman in Shobha De's Fiction

Shobha De, (1989- present), a model cum journalist, is hailed as the ultra modern writer in Indian literary world. Apart from being the author of so many novels like *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1991), *Spouse: the truth about marriage*, *Uncertain Liaisons* (1993) and *Strange Obsession* (1992), she has also been the writer of many admired soaps on television, including India's second daily serial, *Swabhimaan*.

Shobha De depicts for the first time a new urban woman. Her novels and essays shatter patriarchal hegemony. People regard women inferior to men because of their different sex. She seems to be gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. In fact as a writer, she differs considerably from other Indian women novelists writing in English. She believes in very frank telling of incidents and absolute open-heartedness. We don't find anything reserved in her fiction from narrative point of view. The orthodox people in India criticize her for her open discussion on sexual matters. Despite all criticism, her fiction has got tremendous response not only from several European countries but all over the world. It is no less an achievement.

Shobha De has become the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. These women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit. Marriage for them is an insurance against social values.

Her novels can be thematically classified into three groups: firstly, *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts* are the novels that deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, Quest for Identity, Struggle for Survival and Marginality.

Secondly, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* (1992) move around the life in film industry, Bollywood and concentrate basically on lust and sex. And finally, the novels *Sultry Days* (1994) and *Snapshots* (1995) present the emancipation of women and project the ultra-modern life style of neo-rich people.

Shobha De's elite and educated women of the upper class family are trapped in the social institution of the marriage and family for the sake of money and honor as seen in *Socialite Evenings*. As the story unfolds the life of these women, we find the sexual liberties of Anjali who at last seeks solace in religion after her second marriage with Kumar, an impotent and incompatible man; the gorgeous and vivacious Ritu who has developed flirting into a fine art and who leaves her second husband for a smuggler. Karuna's disappointment with her husband nourished her fantasy of a liberated woman.

De's *Starry Nights* is the story of the struggle and survival of a woman in a sex-starved society. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness. She has marvelous understanding of the psyche of women. There are mainly three women characters, Geetha Devi, Malini, Aasha. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the applecart of patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves. They "don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Brimming with hope and zeal, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life. Their crusade against slavery, oppression and exploitation is alarming." [9].

Conclusion:

Finally, all of Shobha De's women in *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, *Strange Obsession* and *Sultry days* reveal that they care two hoots for social disapproval and listen only to the yearnings of their hearts. The image of educated woman in De's novels is beset with the problem of striking an acceptable compromise between modern thinking and aesthetic perceptions and the traditional morality which dogs her at every step.

De's presentation of the women belonging to this society is that of a rebel who does not conform either to tradition or to modernity but chooses to attain a different identity, whereby she may not have to follow any social or moral code of conduct. These women are too self-absorbed; they frequently go into wild race for power and money which they may not always win. But by their conduct and persuasion they tempt the younger women to enter the same race and so lead tradition-conscious women away from the softer and humbler path of womanliness.

REFERENCES

- [1] V. V. N. R. Prasad, "Anita Desai and the wounded self," Indian Women Novelists, Ed. R. K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Prestige Books, Set. 1, Vol. 11, 1991.
- [2] A. Kumar, Novels of Manju Kapur, New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2010.
- [3] N. Kumar, The Road to Baghdad, or Travelling Biculturalism: Theorizing a Bicultural Washington, Washington: New Academia, 2005.
- [4] Cf. Pushp Lata, "A Protest against the Patriarchal in Shobha De's Words," The Fiction of Shobha De, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya, p.63.
- [5] Alka Saxena, "Second Thoughts: A Slice of Urban Life," The Fiction of Shobha De, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya, p.259
- [6] U. Barat, "From victim to non-victim: Socialite Evenings as a version of kunstlerroman," The Fiction of Shobha De, Ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya, New Delhi: Prestige Books, pp. 119-128, 2000.
- [7] P. Syal, "Powder, puffs and Shobha De's fiction: The novel as consumer product," Contemporary Indian Women writers in English: A Feminist perspective, Ed. Surya Nath Pandey, New Delhi: Atlantic, p. 53, 1999.
- [8] Dhawan, R.K., ed. Indian Women Writers. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001.
- [9] Srinivasa Iyengar "History of Indian English Literature".

