

# Concept of New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De

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## ABSTRACT

*Shobha De is a well-known modern novelists and journalists in Indian Writing in English. She throws light on various perceptions of woman's emancipation and freedom. She depicts such women characters who break the traditional and moral values in society. She is quite bold enough to discuss sensitive aspects of human life which she does it perceptively. She is quite adept in dealing with every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular. She is very candid in her narration of incidents. Her feminist approach in her novel brings to light the marginalization of the Indian women at the hands of their husbands. The present paper is a brief study on concept of New Woman in her novels. She portrays a variety of women from the traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated women. Her manner of depicting woman's issue in her novels is quite challenging and untraditional.*

## 1. Introduction

The term 'New Women' implies awakening of women into a new realization of her place and position in family and society, a woman who is conscious of her individuality. The new woman strives to assert and ascertain her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with men.

Since the time immemorial, woman has been glorified by considering her to be an embodiment of sacrifice, submissiveness, chastity, humanity, silent suffering, loyalty and wisdom. The writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Bhabhani Bhattacharya have depicted woman characters in the traditional mould. Their works lack reflection of personal problems of women in patriarchal society.

In Indian society, it is believed that a woman should be virtuous, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her husband and his family. But with the advancement of education, accessibility of education extended to girl child and the influence of feministic movement have created awareness among women of their rights and privileges. Unlike women who steadfastly believe in tradition, young educated women of today are well aware of the gender disparity, discrimination and atrocities attributed to them. They are also conscious that women are oppressed due to enforcement of the role assigned to them. They have to play the role of mother and wife wherein they tend to lose their individuality and self-identity. For her whole life, she remains some one's daughter, some one's wife or some one's mother. She ceases to have self-identity. This kind of patriarchal practice tends to reduce women's status to inferior social beings. Selden states in this regard,

A man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man .she is simply what man decrees...she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute s ex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her;

she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential (Selden 534).

In the modern era, many educated Indian women have determinedly opted writing as their profession. With the emergence of modern Indian women writers, there is a paradigm shift in the trend of Indian Writing in English. In the past, female representation in the works of literature was almost negligible. Male domination was also effective in the field of literature in the recent past. But education, determination and the innovative themes adopted by the modern Indian woman writers have helped them to establish themselves in the field of literature despite initial problems faced by them. Themes of the works of modern Indian women writers are focused on woman characters and their personal issues. This innovative theme has left a deep impact in the minds of the readers. Some of the contemporary Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande depict their feministic viewpoint in their works of literature.

Tradition has very strong grip over the Indian society and even a stronger hold over its women folk. Moreover, in the Hindu society, women are given a status lower than that of men. Traditional rules and norms bind the Indian women to the core. There is a lot of adoration and glorification of women in the myths of India. In Hindu mythology, there are female deities who represent power (Shakti), knowledge (Saraswati) Wealth (Laksmi). But this glorification of woman is confined to mythology, for women in reality tend to lose their individuality and self-identity due to their constant subservient role. This fact has been reflected by Indian Woman Writers in their works of literature. Feminism in Indian Writing in English is a by -product of the Western feminist movement. The contemporary Indian women writers in their writings raise a pertinent question of women's equality with their male counterpart. In their attempts to achieve this equality, Women are stepping out of the rigid roles assigned to them traditionally.

From the writings of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das and Shobha De, it becomes evident that these women novelists envisage a world which should be based on quality sharing and harmony between the two sexes, where the needs, the functions, the virtues of women are valued equally along with those of men.

Education played an important role in bringing Indian women into mainstream of development. Traditional women who still retain their individuality are seen in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. Women who face challenges in their quest for self-fulfillment are portrayed in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Women who opt for modernity for convenience and not out of conviction are seen in the characters of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Women who use modernity as a license for licentiousness can also be seen in her novels. Women who are traditional, oppressed, exploited and tortured in the name of tradition are found in the women characters of Arundhati Roy. Shobha De's women are daring, educated, unconventional, shrewd, rich and self-absorbing and do not adhere to moral values prevalent in the society.

## 2. Discussion

In most of her novels, the focus of attention is on the marginalization of women in Indian male dominated society. Being a feminist, she is well aware of the psyche of women and therefore, she highlights the trial and tribulation of woman especially urban woman in her novels viz. **Sultry Days**, **Starry Nights**, **Strange Obsession**, **Sisters**, and **Socialite Evenings**. De raises voices against the male dominated culture and strongly abominates the marginalization of women. Dr (Mrs) Sheela Rani Khare throws light on the Shobha De's viewpoint, "She 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" (Khare 177).

She does not believe in portraying her women characters as love-slaves or bitches or mere helpmates at home. In her novels she presumably mirrors her own feminist and sexist mind set. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the good old image of woman 'as an appendage' and 'an auxiliary'. Shobha De strives 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 work are more powerful than men. K.K. Sinha's remark is apt here, Shobha De "presents the confident, enterprising, ambitious women, and individualistic New woman, who demands attention, equality, peace; not on compromising terms but on terms at par with man ..." (Sinha 15).

Women are essentially represented sexually liberated and free thinking has become known as the "New women" in the later 20<sup>th</sup> Century fiction. Her woman characters cross all limits which society imposed on them.

Shobha De's woman goes all out in enjoying the status as the new modern woman. They shatter the age old concept of the traditional Indian woman with their assertive, individualistic and carefree attitude towards life. In this new

image, the new woman grabs absolute freedom in almost every field and one of the most striking and interesting freedoms they enjoy is sexual freedom. A new sexual practice is adopted by De's woman, i.e. Lesbianism, which means sexual relationship between women.

Her novels present realistic life of individuals belonging to the rich and powerful upper class of modern Mumbai, who have adapted the culture of western counterparts like London or New York.

Shobha De has gone a step ahead of the man-woman relationship in marriages. Women give emphasis on their priorities and privilege. There is a paradigm shift in woman's writing of 20<sup>th</sup> century. De has gone deep into the subject matter to analyze the man-woman relationship. In **Socialite Evenings**, De has portrayed high profile society of Bombay, the lives of rich house wives spending their lives in loveless marriages whose self-centered husbands treat them more like products than human beings. The so called hi-fi wives are used by their husbands more for social respectability than for love. De has vehemently and intensely advocated that a woman ought to make the point clear to her spouse not to take her for granted, she should assert her individuality and self-identity by giving emphasis on her rights and freedom. She should be bold enough to speak to her counterpart regarding her main concern and choices. She should boldly assert to one and all that she also has the right to be happy like anyone else.

In **Socialites Evenings**, De explicitly deals with Sex. She candidly describes the erotic sex lives of the high society in Mumbai. De expresses the innermost yearning and aspirations of modern women. She has depicted such women who were meek and docile in conservative environments but turns out to be enlightened women with strong willpower and urge for freedom along with their responsibilities, where the middle class always craves for having the lifestyle of the privileged.

Shobha De's women are lifelike. She has successfully depicted the image of the new woman who lives in the aristocratic world of Indian high society. This image is not of the feeble and passive woman feeling scared of male domination. This new woman is vibrant, sturdy and highly assertive.

Shobha De's novels bring to light a perfect feminist image of the emerging new woman who is not a mere puppet in the hands of man but his equal partner, who asserts her individuality and self-identity. De has been able to project an accurate image of the new woman in her novels and that the representation of woman in her novels is effectively thought-provoking in so far as it gives an affirmative moral message to our conservative patriarchal society that the voice of women cannot be suppressed for long. De's women are highly thought-provoking, educated and self-confident. They openly tell men that in no way they lag behind men whatever men do, they too are also capable of doing the same. They crave for attaining careers like modeling, movies, high power business, journalism and advertising.

De's woman characters seldom have any faith in marital and familial bonds. For them, marriage is for convenience and

for status and not the source of ultimate happiness. They do not consider institution of marriage to be a serious affair. They do not hesitate to get involved in extra marital affairs when their married life turns out to be monotonous. The New Women in Shobha De's novels have transformed the traditional concept of marriage which banks on mutual trustworthiness between the spouses. In contrast, these women character consider marriage to be a convenient source of sexual freedom. Their longing and purpose have changed their mindset to have heterosexual extra-marital relationship. Pratibha Gupta states in this regard,

The idea of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a sea change. Now these women are not prototypes of Sita and Draupadi. They have started venting their thoughts and desires. Women in upper class society in India have grown out of the Victorian taboos. For them physical love outside marriage is not considered out of bonds. De portrays these characters as they are. Hence very often her works are viewed as pornographic and distasteful (Verma & Sharma 34).

De exposes the hollowness of man-woman relationship. She does not hesitate to break the traditional shackle by using sex as the means of bargain to attain their social and financial targets. Thereby, Shobha De's women register their protest by distorting the age old image of women and thus want to assert their freedom, equality and identity. Neelam Singh and Rashmi G throw light on the view point of Shobha De,

As Shobha De believes that the woman has to be aware of her identity as human being and think for herself, woman should be an independent identity by being aware of the choices open to her. Shobha de has extraordinary ability to present man woman relationship in really wonderful manner (Neelam and Rashmi 218).

Her free, frank and bold descriptions of battles of sex do not mean that she is a writer devoid of purpose. However, she

is a novelist with a serious purpose for her novels represent liberty, equality and identity for women in the modern Indian society. Her novels are the moral guiding principles that give warning to ultra-modern society and neo-rich women about their rashness and abuse of liberty in the name of ultra-modern civilization and society. De exposes the frailty of ultra-modern women through her women characters. Through her dealing with the subject, sex, she brings to light it a perfect bliss in conjugal life but turns out to a curse in pre-marital and post-marital relationships. Though her novels reflect the involvement of women in free sexual activities, it cannot be apprehended that she accords approval to such a mindset of women. On the other hand, she has aversion towards such strange practices and behaviour. This gets revealed from her portrayal of the awful consequences that her female protagonists confront towards the end. Thus Shobha De's novel shows:

... the Struggle of woman against the predatory male-dominated society. But her vamp ideology of feminism provides no redemption for the deviant and fallen women who in their frantic struggle to escape male-domination and attain individuality, meet with failure and are victimized in one way or the other (Bhatnagar198).

### 3. Conclusion

Shobha De meticulously notices upper-class life of cosmopolitan cities, particularly Mumbai. The story of her life vouchsafes the story of the 'New Woman' of the post-independence India. She brings to light sufferings and sorrow of women and injustices meted out to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society. Consequently, protagonists in her novels are not mere caricature but they are more or less life like human beings. Shobha De depicts the image of New Women in her fiction persuasively.

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