

**MALE Vs. FEMALE: A STUDY OF TENSE CITY LIFE IN SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Shobha De, who contributed profusely to Indian Fiction in English, has deftly painted the picture of male vs. female with various colours of city life. Though she has not achieved much success with the male characters, her skill in the depiction of female characters is superb. In fact, she seems happier in presenting her female characters with all their joys and sorrows in the tense city life. She has transformed the traditional image of woman and openly opposed the male dominance to reflect woman's experiences along with her body language in the fast growing economic world. Consequently, her novels contain the spirit of post-colonial literature that concretizes the adventures of powerful women, who uplift themselves from the traditionally bound, enslaved and exploited life and even prepare themselves for adopting fair and foul means. Their quest for finding self-hood, identity and freedom, which springs from their discontentment with the tense city life, leads them to the advanced level of life in Indian periphery.*

**Key Words:** *Male vs. female, Marriage and sex, Tense city life, Patriarchy, Modernization, Self-hood, identity and freedom*

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Shobha De (b. 1948) is a celebrated Indian columnist and novelist. She has chosen tense city life for delineating sensitive and sensitizing aspects of human phenomena and creating various shades of life values of the contemporary world. She has authored striking novels like *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1991), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sisters* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995) and *Second Thoughts* (1996). She has strange obsession to begin the titles of her novels with the letter 'S', like those of Ekta Kapoor's television serials starting with letter 'K'. Her novels, despite bitter and blunt criticism at the hands of orthodox, rigid and conservative readers and critics, frankly present her study of male and female characters depicting the naked reality of tense city life of today's world.

Shobha De has been controversial because of her frank treatment of sex-orgy and has aroused a strong and fiery debate around her. She has been severely criticized by a group of her

critics who labeled her as ‘the princes of pornography’ on the publication of her two novels—*Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*. A.G. Khan, a bitter critic, gives her the name of ‘Vatsyayani’, who is “educating the ignorant Indians about the sublime world of ant and cock” (78). He writes again, “In fact, I would regard her entire acrobatics as an attempt to reduce fiction to fucktion” (78). The maximum uproar in the critical world arose when De’s *Starry Nights* came into light. Even the female critics revolted against its publication and spoke ill about it. In spite of her severe criticism, she does not lose heart and keeps on writing. In defence of her two novels—*Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*, Shobha De herself comments in her autobiographical book—*Selective Memories— Stories from My Life*:

Why did *Socialite Evenings* generate so much heat? I now wonder, it was innocuously written— no explicit sex scenes. No foul language. Could it have been the theme itself? That a woman could walk out of a perfectly secure marriage out of boredom. Karuna, the main protagonist, is not bitch if anything she is for too sensible and controlled. But, she is the one who recognized her marriage for what it is empty (330).

Shobha De is a bold artist. She candidly depicts usual and unusual sex and talks in an offensive and obscene language on the scandalous subjects like homo-sexuality, prostitution, pre-marital and extra-marital relations and adultery. She skillfully creates her teenagers, both male and female, who possess curiosity about sex and prostitution and wish to visit red light area. She has even shown a gallery “run by a homo-sexual couple” (*Sultry Days* 43). She does not feel any compunction in using the vulgar, foul and pornographic words like masturbation, fuck, semen, etc. She presents her male characters showing no feeling of guilty consciousness in masturbating in front of the minor girls or females. Her male characters, which are notorious by nature, sexually exploit women and abuse the hotel boys. Her female characters consider sex as a palpable, pulsating and compelling reality. They without any shame accept it as an important part of life and let not man take all the initiative. They talk on the topic of sex frankly, participate in it actively, turning up side down the traditional image of woman for whom sex is a shameful hidden sin of her life. They debunk and defy the male hypocrisy and their supposed authority. Casting aside their meekness and submissiveness, they run to the extremes of being violently radical defiantly uncompromising, overly promiscuous and even openly malicious. They revel in

an uninhabited universe where the male is pushed into a corner and forced to live a secluded and subdued existence.

The characters of Shobha De are not pious, God fearing and sanctimonious. Whether they are male or female, they are inconstant, infirm, immoral, infidel and insincere. In case of love, they fall in love at first sight, like those of Shakespeare; but unlike Shakespearean protagonists, they are inconstant, fickle, wayward and wavering in their love and romance. They fall in love at any stage and age. Even the parents of elderly or grownup children unflinchingly indulge in love making in front of the naked eyes of their own offspring and life partners and, therefore, without any hesitation, disturb the peaceful tenor of their family life. They are so impassioned, sexual and lustful that they fail to control their baser instincts or passions. No sooner their eyes meet with the opposite sex than they shake off their shame and indulge in promiscuous activities.

The women of Shobha De, being inconstant and infirm like a butterfly, indulge in sucking the love juice from different men of different ages and status and like the colour of a chameleon, they change their sleeping partners and, therefore, they mar the bliss of their marital life. Shobha De's women are jealous and envious, revengeful and resentful, deceptive and derelict. Their jealousy is not limited to friends and sisters, but it crosses the boundary and is apparent even between a mother and a daughter. In *Sultry Days*, Sweetie makes a plan to go on date with her boy friend– Stash, an affluent and potent man, but Mrs. Barucha, her mother feels jealous when she comes to know about him and she herself plans to date with him. The mother's role, in spoiling their children, is crucial. It may be said that in crumbling moral character in their daughters, they unbelievably play heinous role. They are money-minded and covetous. For the sake of grasping money from the rich class, they can even force their daughter to jump into the filth and mire of sex indulgence as it is done by the mother of Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*. In spite of repeated requests of Aasha Rani, her mother remains dumb and deaf and compulsively throws her daughter like a doll into the laps of the affluent to play with. De has shown that for the decrepit condition of the women, their bearers are more responsible. They, at a very small and immature age, misguide and mislead their daughters and so they very soon fall into the pit of vice and go astray.

In the making of women corrupt, immoral, promiscuous and faithless, their husbands are also not less responsible. Their indifference towards their better halves and indulgence with the

other women make the females lonely and incomplete. When a woman even in the company of her husband feels herself lonely, she seeks a warm and comfortable company of some other man, who can share her feelings, solace in her discomforts and satisfy her physical needs. The cold and heartless company of the husband stifles her throat and she wishes to breathe in cold fresh air. In *Second Thoughts*, the protagonist–Maya, who is constantly neglected, humiliated and hurt by her husband– Ranjan, finds herself praised and honoured by the songs recorded in the cassette presented to her by the eighteen year old neighboring boy– Nikhil; therefore, she feels fascinated towards him and he becomes her husband-substitute even though for a short period and he lessens her boredom, solitariness and as well as satisfies her sex desire. In such cases, a woman does not consider the age, rank and status of the man. But, the condition of De's women is very deplorable. In the end, they are disappointed, deserted and dissatisfied. As soon as they decline in age and degenerate in physique, they find themselves discarded even by their nearest ones. In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna, Ritu and Anjali pass through a very embarrassing situation. Ritu, by her husband Gul, is forced to arrange virgins and Anjali clients to her husband. De's women are 'Picaro' in the words of R. S. Pathak:

In fact, her novels seem to be the modern version of Picaresque novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Picaro in this case is a woman, but she, too, is and of the experiences, in search of which, she goes from place to place (35).

Shobha De's men are usually submissive and timid and in comparison to women they stand on inferior position. They are marginalized and there is hardly any man who rules the proceeding for long period. Therefore, in the fictional world of De, only those men are seen whose authority has been diminished and defied. They are loveable but ineffectual. The female protagonists love them, marry them and protect them in their troubles, but males remain inactive and helpless. Some are disgusting, hollow and hypocritical like Binni Malhotra, Rover and Raman Kaka. Some are certain level headed males like Shanay in *Sisters* and Karan in *Strange Obsession*, who are virtuous but fail to face reality. Some, like Ranjan of *Second Thoughts*, are suffering from mother obsession and, therefore, they themselves are happy but cannot make happy others. The image of man is generally negative in the fictional world of Shobha De. They are shown either seducers, exploiters, wife beaters, rapists, torturers and callous husbands or they are humble and lenient. They are well acquainted with the behaviour, conduct and character of

their wives— what they do, where they go, whom they love and hate, yet they remain dumb-mouthed and do not muster courage to utter even a single word in front of them. If their wives arrive late at home, there is no question on their lips. If they desert them and elope with some other man and come back again, the man unquestioningly accept them and welcome them home. In *Socialite Evenings*, the picture of man is determined by the dictates of the feminist ideology. The women are seen indulging in promiscuity and the men are found tolerant or ignorant. In rare cases, a man raises head against his wife. In *Socialite Evenings*, when Karuna returns home, her husband heartily welcomes her, but instantly dismisses her when he comes to know that she is pregnant with some other man. Sometimes, it happens that a woman is cheated by a man. He attracts her by his way of talking and addressing, increases contact, offering petty gifts, assisting in homely chores and give air to her dream of marrying him and then leaves her without any prior notice after making physical contact as is done by Nikhil in *Second Thoughts*.

Shobha De's women are determined to smash their traditional image and are hostile towards patriarchal male culture. Their approach, their business and their indulgence in free sex without any fear and their use of man as a mere plaything or an instrument when require—all are the proofs of their challenging, defying and revenging attitude against men who have reigned over them since time immemorial. They represent the institution of marriage and family existing in the wealthy middle-class of the Indian society. Her women are too much ambitious and aspiring for such of identity and self-hood. They are modern and strive for their independence. They are bold and strong in their attitude and can take decision for their own survival in the society. Aasha Rani, the leading character of *Starry Nights*, is one such woman as she struggles, succeeds and survives. They lead their lives on their choice even in sex matters. They are lesbian and feel proud of being homosexual. *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession* are the fine examples of lesbianism. In *Snapshots*, the author has presented a tale of six ladies and there is not one protagonist but all are lesbian. In this novel, De is deeply concerned with the alignment of power that exerts physical, political, social and economical control over woman in order to fragment her. The novel is the story of the adventure of powerful new woman standing against the male chauvinism.

Shobha De has highlighted the causes of marital discord and maladjustment between the husband and the wife and their final separation. In her opinion, carnal as well as mental both

causes are responsible for the breach of marriage. Impotency is one such factor as it devastates the pious relations between two married persons— male and female. In *Sultry Days*, Kuki's first marriage fails because her husband is impotent. The insatiate sex-desire instigates a partner to untie the marriage knot and seek out another who can fully satisfy her. In *Second Thoughts*, Maya's marriage is, in reality, a failure for husband— Ranjan who ignores the utility of sex in marital relation. Ranjan remarks, "If one's mind is busy and one keeps oneself active, there cannot be time to worry about sex" (237). Maya does not agree to it and find out Nikhil to complete herself. Homosexuality is another cause of marring marital matters. Homosexuality (gay and lesbian) equally contributes to the damnation of the family life of two persons of the opposite sex. Anjali, in *Socialite Evening*, finds her husband a gay and, therefore, she turns to Lord Krishna and devotes herself to his worship.

Like other psychologists, De considers sex as a vital factor in making conjugal life successful, happy and everlasting. Both man and woman who take an oath in front of fire, in the court-campus, in the church or in front of the Peer (maulvi) to remain truthful, faithful and upright towards each other till the moment they will breath last, they should remain constant and true to their words. De seems to advise through her novels that neither of them should suck the love juice prior to society approves marriage. The happiness and success of marriage depends upon the adjustment, commitment, fidelity and sincerity to each other. The traditionally arrange marriage is perhaps not recommended by De as in her viewpoint it strangulates and snaps a wife's longing for adventure and romance. She has to sacrifice herself on the altar of tradition and customs on which a husband reigns. For example, Maya's desire is rudely snapped and dissolved by sharp edged words uttered by Ranjan in *Second Thoughts*, "There are certain rules you have to abide by them whether you like them or not" (83).

Shobha De, whose novels are a slice of tense city life, are mainly concerned with the critical issues of the present times. It has been alleged that in the fictional works, excepting her short-stories, there is little insight into human nature and very little effort is made to peep into the psyche of the characters. But, this allegation is refuted by her *Second Thoughts*, which is a realistic presentation of the psyche of the traditional Indian man and woman. Although they claim to be the proud products of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and think to be advanced and broad-minded, they are suck to the age-old norms and traditions of the Indian society. In that much familiar

pattern, the mental status of men and women has hardly undergone any change. As individuals, they may have made unexpected progress but in the institution of marriage, the man is still the lord and master and the woman still walks behind on his footprints and obeys his whims and fancies whether they are liked or disliked by her. Husband's coldness, miserliness and strictness spoil the charm of happy home. When he again and again talks of money matters and advises the wife to be economical, she is disturbed. Besides, the mother's obsession also creates hurdle in the success of marriage. In *Second Thoughts*, Ranjan's marriage with Maya is always disturbed by his mother's over interference in their personal life. Ranjan is a mamma's boy who has no power to resist his mother and as a devout obedience, he discusses family matters with his mother. Ranjan's obsession mortifies Maya the most because for everything Ranjan expects her to make the mother her role model. Ranjan, who is the only son of his parents, is totally molded and shaped by his mother. His mother becomes his god and, therefore, he fails to be a loving and caring husband. Duty of a husband does not mean only to provide food, home, and money to the wife. It also includes a certain amount of respect and affection for each other. Ranjan's Oedipus complex thus deconstructs the everlasting marital relation. Through her *Second Thoughts*, De prohibits too much interference of parents in the family life of children. The wheels of the marriage cart are changed, but not the mental culture of the cart driver. This mental culture still exists in the foreign educated bank manager, Ranjan. De wants to convey that in the present time, the well-planned and chosen match proves mismatch much to disgust of the young couple. The arranged marriage of Ranjan and Maya is a false facade of success of marriage. Ranjan's obsession mortifies Maya the most, because for everything he expects her to make the mother her role model. It reflects "emerging paradigm of values in this society which longs for money and high status, forgetting the values of simple living and high thinking, peace and contentment" (Chauhan 88).

Shobha De is mature, insightful, alert and ambivalent and all these qualities of hers can be observed in her fictional world. In her novels, she successfully projects the personalities of Indian men and women leading tense life in the modern cities. She reveals still pervading patriarchal domination in the society, which is not only visible in the suburbs, but also in so-called highly developed and advanced cities of India. The males, how much educated and onward looking may be, still dominate or try to dominate the females and demand from them to stay within the four walls of domesticity. They still want to crush women's sense of self-respect,

self-hood and self-identity. Therefore, De has portrayed man in negative posture with a purpose of showing the contemporary outlook on city life. She has skillfully aroused feminist rebellion against the male-dominated structure of India.

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### **Bio**

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