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# The Concept of 'New Woman' and Her Appearance in Shobha De's Select Novels

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**Abstract:**

The term 'New Woman' evolved to signify the woman's awakening towards realization of her place and position in family and social milieu. Moved by an inescapable inner compulsion to be individual in her own right, this new woman has been trying to advocate woman's right, status and power at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes.' In Indian English fiction, women novelists have powerfully voiced their protest against the patriarchal hegemony. Shobha De, a luminary in the realm of modern English literature in India writes from a definite feminine perspective. She is the best seller novelist and a freelance writer for several newspapers and magazines. As a writer she is adorned with extraordinary ability to discuss sensitive aspects of human life. Shobha De has enlightened and enriched the galaxy of Indian English fictional world with her great works. Her mélange of themes, variety of characters, startlingly captivating thoughts, all are forcefully and colourfully expressed in a racy style. Her works have a realistic touch and sensitive appeal. She discusses blatantly the problems, desires and aspirations of women, especially the urban elites highlighting in general gender awareness, self-definition, existence and destiny. This paper attempts to study the feminist stance of Shobha De as it emerges from her fiction.

**Keywords:** New Woman, Feminine, Modern women, Marriage and Family, Man-Woman Relationship, Sexuality

**INTRODUCTION**

*The New Woman typically values self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Woman'; is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and, accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb.*<sup>1</sup>

Gail Finney (*Women in Modern Drama*)

The concept of "new woman" that first emerged in the late nineteenth century can be taken as an iconic change in gender norms. This new woman had a privilege to enjoy greater freedom to chase and perform public roles and even flaunt her "sex appeal". She defied and detested the conservative gender roles assigned to her and thus met with hostility from men and women who opposed to the public presence of women and gave this a reason for the decline in morality. Debunking and rejecting the age-old ways of roles performed by the females, these women made modern choices in order to express their autonomy and individuality.

What was "new" about women in the early twentieth century? The most prominent change was their increased presence in the public arena. Whereas the lives of most nineteenth-century women - especially middle-class women but also domestic servants and slaves - tended to revolve around home life, modern women ventured into jobs, politics, and culture outside the domestic realm. This image of new woman finds expression in Indian English literature too, where she makes her appearance in flesh and blood in the novels of the women writers majorly.

Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is

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not imposed by patriarchal society. They have concentrated on women's problems in their work and are expressing themselves freely and boldly and on variety of themes from a feminine eye. Among the women writers, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy are foremost in the field. These women novelists have definitely challenged the male culture that prevails in our country. But the early soft voices of protest gradually turned into an explicit annoyance and finally took the shape of an open rebellion. From this point of view, Shobha De, an acclaimed feminist writer has attempted to turn this pattern upside down through her works. She believes in frankness and open-heartedness in the narration of incidents. She understands the psyche of a woman and masterfully handles it. She thus confines her novels to the affluent society and concentrates on women's problems and gives a new approach to them. In 1989, she wrote her first novel 'Socialite Evenings'. Her other works include 'Starry Nights', 'Sisters', 'Sultry Days', 'Strange Obsession', 'Snapshots', 'Second Thoughts', 'Uncertain Liaisons', 'Shooting from the Hip', 'Small Betrayals', 'Surviving Men', 'Selective Memory: Stories from my Life', 'Speed Post', 'Spouse', 'Superstar India: From Incredible to Unstoppable', 'Sandhya's Secret', 'Shobhaa at Sixty', 'Sethji', 'Shobhaa: Never a Dull De', 'Seventy and to Hell with It' and 'Lockdown Liaisons'.

Shobha De shapes her women in the newly evolved composite figure of modern woman who, enjoys physical freedom, sexuality and stamina, who can happily combine pleasure, career and marriage. She does not believe in describing her women characters as love-slaves or bitches or mere helpmates at home. In her novels she presumably mirrors her own feminist and sexist mindset. From this perspective, the women in her works are more powerful than men. Women are essentially represented sexually liberated and free thinking and have become known as the "New Women", in later 20th century fiction. The presentation of modern, rich, educated and assertive women in De's fiction marks a difference from traditional women's problems. Their problems and concerns are different from those of the ordinary, traditional, middle class women. Being educated and wealthy, they have an easy access to new ways of life informing women's independence. Most of the women characters depicted by Shobha De, are conscious of their self-respect because they are competent professionals working shoulder to

shoulder with their male counterparts. This paper is an attempt to study feminist stance from different angles of a woman's life: Marriage and Family, Man-Woman Relationship and Presentation of Female Sexuality as depicted in De's fiction.

**DISCUSSION**

The fictional world of Shobha De is overcrowded with women who occupy the central place in all her novels. In her fictional world women do not seem to have any social obligations or overwhelming male dominance that may restrict their movement or control their social mobility. These women belong to high society world of opulence, romance and showbiz. Moving in the world of freedom and imagined glory these women lead shallow, artificial life lacking touch with harsh realities of mundane life. These women aspire for comfortable, luxurious, leisure-laden life. They always wander in search of new experiences and pleasure. These women's new found freedom develops in them a strange attitude towards marriage and family. Apart from liberated modern women there are authoritative career conscious 'corporate women'. They have acute business sense. Their formidable impressive personalities have an awe-inspiring impact on their male counterparts.

Instead of being submissive and docile women in De's fictional world are assertive and believe in personal success. In spite of their maltreatment at the hands of men these women make frantic efforts to acquire a controlling position in society. They resent and challenge their marginalisation. A dive into different perspectives as depicted in De's fictional world will give us a view of the society emerging in recent times.

**MARRIAGE AND FAMILY**

*Rigveda* speaks of marriage as a union of two persons of full development. The words jaya, jani and patni indicate the respectable position of women in the family. It is observed, "jaya has the special sense of the sharer of the husband's affection and jani the mother of children and patni the partner in the performances of sacrifices." With time, the image of women kept changing and so her place in the family. From having supreme place in the household of her husband to attaining a secondary position, her status has reduced to an object of pleasure and possession. But the 'New Woman' voices a note of dissent to this and resents to be stifled under the oppressive restrictions. The women novelists who once showcased

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female characters as silent-sufferer, enacting various roles of a mother, a wife, a daughter and a sister—a cog in the family machine but never as an individual claiming her life to be her own have taken a transitional turn. These writers have shown an admirable understanding of the problems and the predicaments of the women. They rather give view of the society emerging in recent times, with a changed perception of individual behaviour and the social institutions like marriage and family.

In De's fictional world the institution of marriage stands exposed with all the hollowness and hypocrisy lurking behind it. Marriage is no longer considered a sacred bond between two selves that brings peace and harmony in individual as well as social life. Instead of being a source of solemn unity it becomes a struggle involving relations of power. As all the relationships in the contemporary world of money and power have been commercialized, the institution of marriage also gets influenced by these considerations. In **Sisters**, for example, Mikky wants to marry Navin not out of love but because of his being of use in mercenary considerations. She prefers him as she thinks, "He may help me with Hiralal Industries" (p.62). Similarly, Binny Malhotra entraps Mikky in marriage to gain control over her wealth. The following words of Shobha De about human relationships apply to marriage as well, "Eventually every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level". A particularly pragmatic and materialistic attitude towards marriage makes it dry, sterile and charmless. In De's novels, Anjali and Karuna in **Socialite Evenings**, Aasha Rani in **Starry Nights**, Aparna, Surekha and Rashmi in **Snapshots**, Mikky in **Sisters** and Maya in **Second Thoughts** experience meaninglessness and sterility in their married life.

The charmlessness and lack of emotional understanding in marriage, as depicted in De's novels, turns marriage into a social contract only. In this world of personal success and selfish motives marital fidelity, love for each other and emotional attachment have no meaningful place at all. R.S.Pathak aptly comments on the attitude of the different characters towards marriage in De's fiction, "*Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners.*" Personal accomplishments and moral values have no consideration for such women. To these women, having sexual relations

with their husband seems 'boring' and sounds terrible, "Like eating dal-chaval day in and day out" (Snapshots p.152). These women do not hesitate in having sex before, after and during their married life with men other than their husbands.

Traditional Indian marriage as a foundation of family life and the development of the system of kinship has no significance in De's fictional world. The young men and women in this world do not stick to marriage for long. In these circumstances the institution of family fails to nurture traditional values. Children in such marriages are treated as a liability and an obstacle to social mobility. Shobha De's presentation of marriage with all its hollowness, hypocrisy and insignificance becomes more vehement and remarkable when she depicts the so-called modern marriages. These marriages are supposed to be based on mutual understanding, freedom of choice and an intimate relationship between two partners. People exercise their full freedom yet they fail to make their marriage a happy companionship. In the changed circumstances, marked by personal liberty and freedom of choice, people have become casual in their attitude towards marriage and divorce. They no longer feel any need to perpetuate a marriage that does not come up to their expectations. According to Shobha De, "*The terms underlying marriage have also been redefined in recent times with some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her head chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a life-long meal-ticket. Divorce, too, has to be viewed in this light.*"

Shobha De, no doubt, expresses a discontent with traditional form of marriage that tends to marginalise and subjugate women. She fictionalises Maya's plight in marriage that results in her isolation and causes mental pain. The insensitive attitude of her husband Ranjan towards her biological and emotional needs makes her marriage sterile. It makes her find solace in extramarital relations with Nikhil. On the other hand, De also makes fun of modern, liberated women's non-serious and casual attitude towards marriage. The impulsive decisions of these people regarding marriage make a mockery of it and express these people's failure to understand the real significance of marriage due to their misconceived notions of modernity, freedom and true companionship.

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In the fictional world of Shobha De the concept of marriage exhibits tremendous change from the traditional Indian marriages and families. It shows the change informing people's attitude towards marriage in recent times. A marriage lacking traditional sanctity and mutual understanding results in fragile familial ties. The families based on the modern marriage presented in De's novels tend to disintegrate quickly making their members self-indulgent, disrespectful and irresponsible. De seems to put a large interrogative over the modern marriages by showing the futility of such marriages based on momentary passions.

MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP

Man-woman relationships present an interesting aspect of life in De's novels. The depiction of these relationships brings out the ironical nature of the conflicts seen here. A pattern of love-hate relationship marks the understanding between men and women in De's fiction. Women express their disgust, hatred and dislike for men in unambiguous terms. They consider their male partners dishonest, selfish, cruel and self-obsessed, "Men are all the same—animals... and we women such fools" (**Starry Night**sp.50). For Rashmi in **Snapshots** men are, "Intrinsically, instinctively, intuitively dishonest" (p.49). It is quite striking and startling that these women express a particular liking for those very men about whom they vomit venom. For example, Aparna in **Snapshots** knew, "Rohit was a very selfish man... Selfish and vain" (p.21). But after his departure she misses him intensely and craves to have him again, "What she wanted was a steady, warm, attentive companion. No, if she were to be honest with herself, she'd admit it more readily... it wasn't just a man she missed... it was Rohit, her husband" (p. 24). In **Sisters**, Mikky's relationship with Binny Malhotra is also baffling. She marries him and comes to know about his previous wife and children. In spite of his refusal to leave his earlier wife and children and his ill treatment of Mikky, she says, "It makes me happy that he is there in my life. That he is my man—at least in the eyes of the world" (p. 124). The paradox evident in De's treatment of man-woman relationships marks De's particularly ironical stance vis-à-vis her fictional characters and their way of thinking. Mikky is a modern educated woman. She does not hesitate in choosing and changing sexual partners. Her attitude towards her husband, at the same time, marks the traditional nature of her behaviour. In spite of all his drawbacks and cruelties shown towards her she considers him 'my man'. This brings out the ironical nature of her

views. Shobha De seems to convey that women are more humane and sensitive towards their male partners in spite of their uninhibited, promiscuous behaviour. Their weird behaviour is sometimes an attempt to register their presence seeking recognition and understanding in the world of men governed by practical and sexual considerations. Their changed perception makes them believe:

The trick was to get them hooked. Become an incurable habit in their petty, self-obsessed lives, get them so beholden that they thought they could not live without you—or more accurately—without the services *only you* could provide (**Snapshots** p.49)

The nature of interpersonal relationships in De's fictional world brings out an interesting aspect of man-woman relationships. Women characters seem to be engaged in a never-ending struggle against male dominance. It is interesting to note that these women do not spare their female companions also. They often go against one another. On the other hand, the male characters are rarely involved in a bitter rivalry against one another. The relationships between different men are rarely spoiled by business rivalry or social and political considerations. The life depicted in De's novels does not inform any common human interests. All the people seem to be interested in individual success and selfish pursuits. The novelist explores the strange concerns and pragmatic attitude of the people inhabiting her fictional world in general and the women related to showbiz in particular. These people see, to be more concerned with material success, class mobility and glamour. This world is away from the ordinary family affairs, domestic problems and the matters related to daily life. The world of showbiz is an isolated, unreal world built on illusions and technicoloured reality.

PRESENTATION OF SEX

An important aspect of De's fictional world that has caused much shock to the critics and invited harsh comments is the treatment of sex. Sex not accompanied with love and emotions becomes mechanical and functional only. This kind of sexual union finds expression in even the married life of different characters in De's

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fiction. Sex turns out to be a compulsive exercise which is referred to as “duty fucking” (**Snapshots** p.108) by these characters themselves. Instead of providing enjoyment and pleasure the sex act causes frustration, disillusionment and humiliation to the female partners. Sexual intercourse for men becomes an effort and a symbolic act to subjugate women and to exercise their control over the female body and mind.

The presentation of female sexuality in De’s novels is based on the acceptance of sexual desire in a woman as natural and normal. Women, in this world, do not feel ashamed of their sexuality. They do not try to suppress their sexual urge rather they want it satisfied in their own terms. For them the concepts of chastity and purity have no significance. Neither do they suffer from any sense of guilt. Sex becomes a routine exercise for them. Their attitude towards sex marks their different nature. Instead of trying to conform to the prototypes of Sita, Savitri and Anusuya, these women tend to create a world free from all inhibitions. These women’s ideas and their sexual behaviour marks the attitude of so called liberal-minded people towards sex. It also forms a way of their assertion for an autonomous identity. These women’s demand for a separate identity and their assertion of female sexuality in the form of unabashed pursuit of sex point out a new awareness among them.

De herself is conscious of the changed perspective about sex that gets revealed in her novels. She herself admits, “*Yes, the sex in the books is quite grim... It’s unhappy sex seen from a fairly lonely woman’s point of view. Some people, however, find sex seen from a woman’s view point so threatening that it’s much easier to dismiss it as sleaze.*” These words reveal the real purpose of the depiction of sex and sexual behaviour in De’s novels.

A close study of De’s presentation of sexual behaviour of men and women in her fictional world reveals that her real concern is to expose the frustration, disgust and repulsive nature of uninhibited sexual indulgence. We, no doubt, find an abundance of titillating, detailed descriptions of sexual behaviour of the people presented in De’s novels but this does not limit her purpose to the creation of sensational reading material only. She rather makes an endeavour to expose the futility and meaninglessness of this behaviour. She neither

romanticizes nor glorifies the sex life practised by the characters in her fiction.

Shobha De’s women characters represent a true picture of the modern Indian women. Female sexuality finds new dimensions, as women here are not contented with heterosexual relationships only. It finds expression and consummation in lesbian relationships and mechanical methods of gratifying the sex urge. In their bid to find substitute means of sexual gratification that do not involve dependence on man, women indulge in strange, shocking and surprising sexual practices. In fact, De seems to mock at the high-class society women with their new found sexual freedom. De shows how the sex act becomes futile even funny when indulged in without any emotional attachment or feeling of love and understanding by these women. The detailed description of sexual intercourse as found in the novels depict her intention to hint the comic, ugly and unpleasant aspect of such act. Instead of using direct comments to expose the distasteful nature of the sex act De has shown people indulging in uninhibited, abnormal, unnatural and aggressive sexual behaviour and tried to make them ultimately realize the futility and charmlessness of this act. Shobha De seems to convey to the so-called emancipated women that indulgence in uninhibited sex and immoral aggressive behaviour does not grant real happiness.

**CONCLUSION**

By having an overview of De’s selected novels, we find that as a feminist novelist, Shobha De has marvellous understanding of the psyche of women and therefore, she explores the world of urban women with all its overwhelming problems and challenges. She emphatically purports the view that even in modern times with all socio-political as well as, economic achievements, the graph of women exploitation is shockingly rising. Women sometimes owing to the compelling situation of their life, are pushed into the net by their protectors while at other times their soaring ambition and will to assert their freedom, takes them into the tunnels of unimaginable sufferings.

The novelist decodes her women characters’ feelings and emotional traumas in different ways and from various perspectives. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. As Shobha De’s women don’t believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Struggling hard with

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hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tears filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge the society to turn the tide in their favour. De's fiction does not attempt to reform the society but presents it amusingly in naturalistic terms along with its idiosyncrasies.

The *Tribune* rightly observes:

“She slaughters macho males with vengeance and rattle-poisons her gender with disdain and disregard. She is Shobhaa De, and she is scintillating and straight. She is a ruthless writer with a ramrod of a pen, and a ranging urge to kill somebody. She demolishes reputation and civilizations; with effortless grace and one thing she doesn't stomach is hypocrisy of any kind. She wields a powerful camera, and she needs to keep shooting that way whether anyone likes to photograph or not.”

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