

The Emergence of New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De

Abstract

The emergence of women's writings in India during the last quarter of the 19th century is of great importance in the sense that it marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian women. The concept of New Woman emerged as a feminist ideal in the final decades of the 19th century in Europe and North America. This new ideology was heavily opposed by the conservatives however it was favoured and encouraged by men. Shobha De is a well known novelist who has proved her stance as a supermodel, journalist, editor, columnist, and as an author. Through this paper I have tried to postulate De's perception of New Woman in her novels. Her novels show a great insight in giving a real picture of the Indian lifestyle psyche.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Universal Suffrage, Pursuit, Hegemony, Phallogocentric.

Introduction

The concept of New Woman emerged as a feminist ideal in the final decades of the 19th century in Europe and North America. It was a reaction of the role, as characterized by the so-called Cult of Domesticity ascribed to woman in the Victorian era. Novelists play rights, journalists, political thinkers and suffragettes advocated this New Woman ideal. Men emphasized and favored the new cause. The supporter's common aim was to encourage women to liberate them self from the patriarchal strictures, manage their own lives and leave behind anything that might hamper their growth, their quest and pursuit of happiness and their self-realization. However this new ideology was heavily opposed by the conservatives and the New Woman's movement started to fade away in the course of the First World War when due to shortage of man power many women took on jobs and when shortly after the war universal suffrage was achieved. Certain trails regarding the new ideal of New Woman were clearly drawn. A New Woman was supposed to be adequately educated, self reliant, financially independent, political and self decisive, even have freedom to decide if when and to whom she wants to marry and how many children she wants to have, to show outward signs of being different by wearing more comfortable clothes and above all to defy conventions and social norms in order to create a better world for all. Charlotte Perkins describes the new woman as "one who realizes her personality to achieve self determination through life, growth and experience". Gilman writes-

Here she comes, running, out of prison and of the pedestal, chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman."

Surprisingly the emergence of women's writings in India during the last quarter of the 19th century is of great significance in the sense that it marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian Woman. Shobha De occupies a distinctive place as a novelist and a journalist in the literary scene in India. She is a well known novelist among the young generation of readers in India and abroad. She has always been pre-occupied with creating a new image of the Indian Woman who has been traditionally taken for granted as a docile, weak and submissive individual suppressed and dominated by the male dominated society. The quality that keeps Shobha De apart from other novelists of India is that De's new woman exploits her physical potential more daringly than other women novelists.

Shobha De is a novelist of twenty-first century. She has proved her stance as a super-model, journalist, editor, columnist, T.V. script writer and as an author. All her fourteen books have topped the charts and she is one of India's best selling authors. Her first book "Socialite Evenings" (1988) alarmed the arrival of a brash, ambitious, daring author who as an Amazon pounced upon the double standards of morality. Focusing on power-politics and power imbalance in sexual relationships and many other social issues, she has tried to discover India seriously through her Indian eyes. Her novels show a great insight in giving a real picture of

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the Indian life style and psyche, yet in her writings on sex, she is not restrained by social sanctions unlike other women novelists who have always shown a conscious restraint in writing about the physical side of man-woman relationships and also about the dark sides of loose morals in marital relationships. She tries to shatter the patriarchal hegemony through her novels and essays. She claims herself to be "Among the first to explore the world of the Urban Woman in India" ² she writes

I write with great deal empathy towards women, without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about woman's situation. ³

In her novels "Socialite Evenings" Shobha De explores the lives of the wealthy Urban Indians who are engaged in sexual promiscuity. It projects a new breed of woman who demand equality with man in all works of life. She describes Mumbai High Society with all its glamour and dirt. Sexuality is highlighted from the point of view of the physical need. She portrays the modern woman Karuna in her novel who is aware of her "otherness" and wants to break out. She is not submissive and compromising to the dogmas, to the traditional set pattern, rather she dons herself as she grows into a different woman. She develops in herself an urge to the fascinating modern world of different girls who become models. She signs an assignment secretly which lands her in the "lewd and clandestine world of modeling --- as the Terkosa Girl".⁴ Karuna asserts her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. She is though accused of lechery and bitchiness by Anjali, when Karuna dates with the New Delhi ad film maker in London. She stays in US and becomes more assertive by rejecting to succumb to the hegemony of the malist culture.

"Socialite Evenings" gives us the picture of marginalized Indian Woman at the hands of their husbands. Shobha De portrays the glare and glitter and enticement of young women in the fascinating world of Mumbai. Karuna's marriage proves to be a total disaster. It lacks love, faith and bonding. Karuna feels that she has married "the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time". Her husband is 'unexciting, uninspiring, untutored. He was not made for introspection'. (65) However Karuna is not afraid, she faces it boldly and defiantly for she realizes "marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to" (68). Despite her detest for her husband's callous attitude she never feels demoralized. Rather like a "new woman" she fights back, resists and shouts back.

In a patriarchal male dominated society a woman becomes marginalized and whatever is mattered to her is trivialized. Her subordination stuck her to have no choices. The Indian male in Shobha De's novel is a person who is "terribly threatened by self-sufficient women".⁵ He is incomplete and inadequate as a husband since he lacks the traits of an ideal husband. Karuna's husband bullies, thrashes and asserts power affirming his male-chauvinism. Whereas Karuna full of facts and fantasy craves for physical desire finds reflection in her fantasies. Locked up in a fragile and futile marital knot she has become frigid. Her pursuit finds respite in Girish in whom she finds psychological and emotional fulfillment. She wanted to be whole and without a man, woman is a fragment a partial self. Spiritually Karuna is spotless and unsullied. Karuna plays different roles in different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor writer

and a paramour. As a free woman she has her own way and frees to choose her ways and means and unveils and unfurls herself to activate the creative urge stifled within herself.

In "Starry Nights", the second novel, Shobha De describes the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to defy rebelliously against the institutionalized patriarchal social system. De's women protagonists refuse their reduction which is main in the phallogocentric pattern. They deconstruct the paradigm of constitution of patriarchy. Asha Rani the protagonist of the novel challenges the patriarchal orthodoxy. She is assertive, pragmatic and strong woman who takes her own decision. She breaks off her engagement with Naveen when she finds that he cannot respond to her wish. She shuns away out rightly the social taboos by accepting her affairs and attitudes. The actress decides finally to quit films and live with Akshay, though her (mother) Amma tries to dissuade her from doing so. She retorts boldly:

"Money, money and money. That's all you think of well. I'm fed up of being your money machine. I've done enough for everybody. Sudha and others_____ Now, I want to live for myself and enjoy life."⁶

Hence we can say that Asha Rani constructs her own identity to resist the hierarchal arrangement of societal set up and relationships. She designs a code of conduct for herself which is free of the prescribed gender roles and sexual restraints of traditional society.

In De's novels women are very frank and clear about their views on sex. It is a kind of 'mutual need' and mutual dependency. It is not dirty, rather it is something special, beautiful and De considers it as the "bedrock of all relationships". She celebrates the sexuality of woman. Her attitude towards sex is quite mature and she becomes critical of mechanical, love less and routine sex. The "sexless existence" is bound to leave a scar/blot on the psyche of sensitive woman. So Asha Rani, Rita, Karuna and Malini opine that- "Indian men make the world's lousiest lovers" and that shows that they are (too) high on ego, low on performance. De compares them to animals and the women are such fools. Through "Starry Nights" De describes how the male members of Mumbai's High Society exploit women. It projects the hypocrisy set in the film industry. The tycoons and film producers only want to make money and use the women as 'sex pots'. But De's women subvert the old pattern creating a new set pattern of values and carve a niche for themselves not just for idealistic or aesthetic purpose but for their self assertion. Through this paper I have tried to explore De's vision, her perception of creating a new paradigm by deconstructing the hierarchical arrangement of societal relationships between the sexes. The ordeal is difficult yet progressive in one's overall growth.

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