

Deconstruction of Patriarchal Structure: Subversion, Perversion and the Aesthetics of Eroticism in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Night*

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Abstract: *Shobha De is a modern novelist believing in empowerment of women and liberalization. The journey of New Woman becomes very interesting when we enter in the world of Shobha De who uses all tools and strategies to empower her women. Her woman is at her best moving in the society freely puncturing conventional morality. She is no longer a mere shadow of man but aspirant to do well in society. New Woman of Shobha De is the product of modern technological advancement, growth of education and the changing social set up. Her perception about the contemporary reality makes her different from other Indian women novelists. Shobha De accumulated the knowledge about women and excelled herself as a journalist and magazine editor. She was closely associated with the world of Mumbai Cinema. Therefore, she knows well about the dark life behind the screen, with all its ugly, dirty details. R. Morgon (1983) observes, "De's women like Anjali and Karuna project their power on others, to deconstruct the male ego. They like to be "eroticized as objects" and to view themselves as "erotic objects", not subjects." (Morgan 143) Shobha De is a voracious reader and an active journalist. She accumulated knowledge about Indian women before she conceived her New Women protagonists. She published her book Selective Memory', Stories of My Life (1998) articulating her wonderful mystery in selecting and weaving a chain of such events that have shaped her mind and influenced her character.*

Key Words: *Eroticism, Perversion, Empowerment, Liberalization, Accumulated, New Woman, Strategies.*

Shobha De writes about the complexities of life of the people of Mumbai. Her main focus is on the elite of metropolis. She has faithfully depicted the harrowing lives of the middle class women who are over ambitious and passionate about sex and glamour. She uses the terminology of latest fashions and always used slang speech. She borrowed images and phrases from pop music, Western style dances, trendy hairstyles, high heels mascara and Hollywood magazines. Each woman protagonist of Shobha De makes serious efforts to deconstruct traditional patriarchal structure. All her women protagonists are rebels in society, as they pursue their ambitions independently. Shobha De raises a strong protest against the traditional mind set of male domination and patriarchal oppression. Shobha De presents the image of woman who is ultra-modern, revolutionary in outlook, progressive in ideas and a spirited fighter for rights and justice. New Women of Shobha De struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength and confront and resist male domination. Jyoti Puri has investigated how in the post-colonial era women struggle to "conceptualize their gender and sexuality". Women of Shobha De fall in this category. Jyoti Puri has discussed the issues of "woman, body and desire". (Puri 1) They are selfish and epicurean and only live for themselves. They desperately fight, revolt and shape their destiny. Her New women do not believe in suffering submissively, they use all the means to achieve joy and success in life.

Nisha Trivedi observes thus about the feminist vision of the post-colonial women writers: . "They have explored the vital areas of individual consciousness and have projected the fascinating images of cultural change, rather than transformation" (Trivedi 180). Sartre observed in *Being and Nothingness* that "man is free to express his inner potential; her choice determines what he is in the society." Aasha Rani, Anjali and Karuna are free and they use their freedom passionately; their quest to enjoy the hedonistic pleasures of life eventually leads them into the quagmire of sexual filth and sensual eroticism. They are given full freedom by the novelist to ride on the tide of success and glamour. They feel proud by selling their bodies to different customers at different terms. Betty Friedan (1971) expresses her new vision of sexuality thus:

Woman's sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfillment ignores (Friedan 130).

Women of Shobha De play with the emotions and passions of man intentionally. In *Socialite Evenings*, for instance, the naked body of Nisha is viewed as it was an object of otherness. She uses bed as a powerful tool to take revenge from man. The women struggle hard to turn the tide in their favour. They face hardships, exploitation and defeat at different stages in their life but they are not discouraged. Instead, they continued to challenge the patriarchal society. They fight against slavery, oppression and exploitation. The women have broken all the barriers to assert

themselves. Shobha De rebels against the existing moral codes and social norms. She has acquired enough courage and strength to fight and challenge injustice. She emerges as a tremendous personality in quest of her identity. Sarah Grimke points out that the “evolution of New Woman is the result of male oppression and domination of centuries” Shobha De is a modern feminist who ruthlessly destroy the old image of woman launching a crusade against woman subjugation. Shobha De’s novels deal with the new ideology of love, sex, marriage and family. Woman is no longer stuck in the kitchen or trapped in the marriage responsibilities as we in the fiction of R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. New Woman of Shobha shatters conventional marital relationship to satisfy her natural urge in human relationship. Shobha De revolts against the traditional view of the novelists in her evolution of the marital relationship. Man and woman is depicted as a mechanical affair, it is depicted as hollow and ineffectual. The women in De’s fiction suffer as an oppressed wife. They hate colonization of their body. Shobha De has portrayed her female characters, bold and assertive. Krishan Avtar Aggarwal in his latest book: *Writing in English: A Critical Study* (2003) observes thus:

Shobha De’s women characters suffered in heterosexual relationship due to lack of experience, maturity and the neglect and non-cooperative attitude of their husbands (Aggarwal 223).

Even then they do not escape from the syndrome of dilemma, confusion and inaction. Anjali in *Socialite Evenings* depicts the mind set of male chauvinism thus: “Men feel terribly threatened by self-sufficient women. They understand that they are becoming victims of cultural and social domination and marginalization. Simon de Beauvoir that religion and culture imposes certain constraints on women inhibiting their growth and freedom: “She has no right to any sexual activity apart from marriage...” (Beauvoir 123). The predominant feature of New Woman of Shobha De is her sexual liberty in human relationship. Shobha De presents for the first time a generation of lusty female protagonists who emerge as radical lesbian feminist separatists. Shobha takes the aesthetic of fiction into the height of pornography to dig out the truth about female sexuality. Karuna is the main protagonist of the novel who joins hands with Anjali and Ritu to bulldoze conventional ideas and theories about love, marriage and sex. Karuna seeks extra-marital relationship to escape from anxiety and existential angst. She uses the tool of her sex for social and financial security. She revolts against the institution of marriage. Her New Woman is not a victim but a real modern heroine who controls her situation boldly and avenges upon her male partner.

Socialite Evenings of Shobha De was published in 1988 and created a sensation in the literary world. The novel ushered in a new era and turned out to be the best seller and soon Shobha De became an international celebrity. She was called D.H. Lawrence of India and a trend setter who excavated the inner turmoil of modern women burdened under the weight of conventional morality and patriarchy. Shobha De bulldozes all age old taboos presenting shocking sensual scenes in her novels. Her New Woman rejects heterosexuality and finds solace in woman to woman relationship. The major focus of Shobha De is on the exposure of exploitation of women. The strength of the novel is the themes of libidinal fantasies of working women of Mumbai, domestic violence, sexual oppression, rape and depression. Mumbai thrives on money culture like New York, the working middle class woman are trapped in the claustrophobic environment of the glamorous city. She points out that male hegemony is very destructive in using and abusing female body. Shobha De has depicted smug selfish husbands who use their wives not for love but for social respectability. She discusses the social and legal issues concerning increasing rate of divorces and the futility of marriage in metropolis like Bombay. She voices that women are not inferior to men. We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized (69). Karuna is used as an eye of the camera to visualize the world of pretension and deceit of Mumbai. The suffering of Karuna symbolizes the polarity between activity and passivity. According to traditional setup of mind women are regarded as the symbol of passivity but when they become active, the activeness of men is drowned. Karuna uses a pack of lies to survive in harsh society of Mumbai.

Karuna belongs to an orthodox family. Karuna feels suffocated. She aspires to enter into the Bollywood employing the strategies of lies and treachery. When she is a school girl, she tells lies to meet her classmate Charlie. She is the first girl in the school to wear stretch pants to look modern. *Socialite Evenings* is an exploration of the journey of Karuna who rises from a middle-class girl to a famous celebrity. There are three important phases of her life, her life when she was unmarried and her life after her marriage. Then her last phase is very sensational as she ceases to be a traditional married woman. In all these three phases of this New Woman, the most conspicuous trait is her rebellious instinct. At school, she was a “defiance took another turn. I wanted to be different because I wasn’t rich” (9). When she was a school girl she was a problem child. She wouldn’t go to school by train or by a double-decker bus. Her dressing habits were erotic: “ I would try and attract attention by wearing my sash hispster style, hitching the hem of my dress higher than was allowed” (9). Her sisters were hard working and studious but she yelled: “Fuck studies” (13). She had passion for the stars and actresses; Karuna adopted a strange attitude in her school life. Her manners were different, etiquettes were revolting and habits were provocative. She was growing into a protesting and dissatisfied girl. L.Sonia Ningthoujam explores the glamour world of Shobha De and observes thus:

Women in the glamour world are, in traditional parlance, characterless with no consideration for traditional morality which, in fact, is called into question. Knowing well this fact, the new generation of ambitious women is ready to make every compromise as long as they can get riches and fame (Ningthoujam 43).

Shobha De depicts the patriarchal oppression which alienated Karuna and forced her to adopt an attitude of “intransigence” (12). She was sick of hearing the moralistic talk of her orthodox and strict father who urged her to “improve the mind” (12). She had to follow strict army rules: “ Lights off at 10 P.M. Up at 5.30. No eating between meals. No “idle talk” over the telephone” (12). Karuna is over ambitious in her life right from her school days and as she grew up she was almost crazy to explore the outside world. She envied the rich and affluent girls of Mumbai girls who enjoyed all the amenities of life. Her friend Charlie inspired her to become a model for advertisement agency breaking the norms of her family traditions. She has seen the first adult movie: *Splendour in the Grass*. Her photographs are published in a newspaper. They are published without her permission and without payment. The discovery of her photographs in a newspaper by her father earns her a tight slap. But it only intensifies her rebelliousness against her father. The ads keep appearing in the newspapers. It means money and a quick thrill of excitement for her. It is an ego-satisfying experience for Karuna. No doubt that Charlie's Uncleji cheats Karuna but from there starts her career of modeling via Charlie. When her photos were published in a magazine her father looked apoplectic and scolded her like a Bluebeard Patriarch:

When did you do this? How dare you? Do you want to disgrace us completely? This is not something girls from respectable families do. How did this photograph get there? (20).

Karuna hates the middle class mentality of her parents. She didn't want to be a frog of the well and she hated boredom and shabbiness of her middleclass background. She confesses thus: “But the rebelliousness I had cultivated in school now surface with vengeance. The ads kept appearing again and again and again –but the slaps stopped” (*Socialite Evenings* 21). She also developed friendship with a boy Bunty, her parents loathed Bunty. Karuna started ignoring her parents; she was used to the criticism of her parents. Bunty is a management trainee in a multinational company. Her affair with Bunty is “only one more step in my rebellion” (*Socialite Evenings* 25). Her feelings for Bunty are muddled up. Shobha De has not concentrated only on sexual desires of Aasha Rani. The very birth of Aasha Rani was a bitter agony. In her childhood, she was deprived of parental love, and emotional security, Aasha Rani had to face starvation and poverty. Her mother pushes her into the act of making the blue films. The critical of the text reveals that Shobha De has depicted the hopes and aspirations of a modern young girl whose main motive is success, glamour and money. Aasha Rani, is nicknamed as “Sweetheart of the millions. She uses sex as a tool to get freedom anxieties and dilemmas of life. Aasha is a female gangster who uses all the sexual strategies to entrap men to expose them.

Shobha De has focused on the theme of complete emancipation of woman. She projects the ideas of liberating woman through self-realization. The journey of Aasha Rani and her quest for total liberation is at once interesting and exciting, sensational and revolutionary. Aasha and sensual love making as described between Mikki and her husband Binny Malhotra on the moonlit night in his place before their marriage. Dr Horney observes that “unfulfilled desires lead to depression and deflation of self.” Aasha Rani's quest for money and glamour leads to her gradual disintegration of life. She is desperate, restless and guilt –ridden. All her experiments proved counter-productive as she is caught in the whirlpool of lust and sexual pleasures. Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* to depict the plight of the Afro-American black women. Morrison uses the tools of rape and sexuality to depict the exploitation and oppression of the whites. But in the novels of Shobha De the journey of the women protagonists is towards moral doom and corrosion of self. At the end of each novel of Shobha the women protagonists suffer from the fracture of identity and cultural displacement as they are completely cut off from friends and close relatives. They do achieve commercial success but they have to pay a heavy price. They experience the loss of self and disorientation of mind. Some of them even contemplate to commit suicide as the guilt is too heavy for them to bear.

Shobha De has narrated a realistic tale of Asha Rani who has confronted with the every sort of situation in order to become a successful star in the Bollywood. The novelist portrays her New Woman in a glamorous and erotic role. Geeta Barua comments thus: “The novel is also a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, glamour, crimes, lies, and deceits and sexual exploitation. Since Shobha De the novelist has been long associated with the Bombay film world as a journalist she knows it first hand and has been able to portray it well” (Barua 174). Asha Rani like Karuna also belongs to a small town with her middle class background. Her journey of life begins with her passion to become a star in the world of Mumbai. Aasha Rani doesn't want to go to Mumbai but her mother forces her to become a money-making machine in her youth..Tears roll down the cheeks of Aasha Rani, when she leaves for Bombay. Like a caged bird, she is forced to perform in porno session. Her mother cruelly struck her when she resisted. Before porno session, she helplessly cries, protests and repeatedly requests Amma to save her life. Aasha is always haunted by her harrowing past.: “Amma please don't. I am sacred. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers“ (*Starry* 53) Nisha Trivedi in her article, “Search for Identity in *Starry Nights*” published in *The Fiction of Shobha De*, reviewed the novel thus:

The writers of the post-independence fiction have focused on contemporary problems. They have explored the vital areas of individual consciousness and have projected the fascinating images of cultural change, rather than transformation” (Trivedi 180).

A strange obstinacy developed in her as she admits: “ But now I was so inured to their disapproval of nearly everything about me that it was really there approval of anything that scared me”(22). It is a chance that Karuna

meets Anjali who is the wife of a wealthy playboy. Her journey begins when she meets Anjali and is stunned to see the life style of Anjali who is a New Woman of Shobha De. Karuna's friendship with Anjali is disliked by her family "her mother had a psychic awareness of the unsuitability of their friendship" (12). She revolts against her parents' wishes. Anjali is ultra-fashionable, bold and a socialite. She owns "French perfumes, Impala in silver grey and a fancy place in Malabar Hill". R. Morgon (1983) observes, "De's women like Anjali and Karuna project their power on others, to deconstruct the male ego. They like to be "eroticized as objects" and to view themselves as "erotic objects", not subjects"(Morgan 143) Anjali becomes a role model of Karuna as she also makes progress in fashion designing and advertising. Karuna is sure that she can earn a lot of money by entering into the fashion world. But Anjali accuses Karuna of bitchiness and lechery, her insatiable appetite for sex. Karuna meets Anjali's husband Abe who is womanish and an expert in seducing women Anjali warns Karuna of her husband discussing openly the sexual weakness of her husband who is a "bastard".

I have lost all my girlfriends to Abe. The minute he meets them, he starts his seduction plans. It doesn't take very long. One lunch, two drinks-and boom- they're in bed. I don't want to lose you" (41).

Like Dr Faustus, she is greedy and passionate to enjoy money and freedom. Karuna's approach to life is epicurean and materialistic. So she freely indulges in the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, the middle-aged prominent socialite. Karuna throws away all the moral values into the air and is lost in the glamorous world of modeling and friendship with her boy friend Bunty. She leaves no stone unturned to puncture the conventional morality. Shobha De has described two important episodes in Karuna's life taking her in a new phase of life. First she dates with the New Delhi ad film maker in London. Karuna is highly thrilled to see the Western society in London. She feels a feeling of superiority and makes her assertive and bold. Further, her stay in America develops in her a feeling of confidence and egoist. She feels that she is not cut out for middle class boring and stereotyped life.

Karuna was won over by Bunty. "Both Bunty and Karuna enjoyed dating pleasures: We dated for a bit...not real dates, what we called "group outings" Safety in numbers (*Socialite Evenings* 65). Shobha De has described the gradual disintegration of the married life of Karuna beginning with Chapter Seven when she starts living in a fantasy world. Ironically she was reading Camus, Jung and Freud in those days. She was feeling bored and buried herself most of the time in her room reading books and newspapers. There was no understanding between her and Bunty. She started feeling guilty she married "the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time." Karuna found her husband an average Indian husband," unexciting, uninspiring, untutored". She felt that "the social life that went with the marriage was worse" (95). Karuna is of critical nature. She realizes that extra-marital relationships are bad and they are going to have negative impact on her psyche. But she is driven by her passion of material comforts and success. In spite of everything, she is aware that a husband was above all, a sheltering tree, a rock to the wife. Karuna reacts against male superiority.

To conclude, Shobha De is an ultra modern novelist who used sex as a therapy to relive the tensions and anxieties of her women oppressed by the male dominated society. Her novels are controversial but her bold themes and ultra feminism punctures the traditional morality depicting the need for women empowerment and liberalization on the pattern of American society where sexual liberty is granted to all.

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