

A STUDY OF SHOBHA DE'S SISTERS FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For female characters of Shobha De, sex happens to be an inevitable affair. They never hesitate to frankly express their opinion about it in a public forum. Sex is given a pulsating and compelling treatment by them. These female characters are distinct and different from our traditional women characters who treat sex as a social taboo as well as shameful and hidden act. The female characters of Shobha De serve as harbingers in letting known to the world about the arrival of modern women. These modern women are neither willing to subordinate nor show any kind of passiveness to sex. Instead, they exert their own passion so as to make a serious dent in the male ego. Shobha De takes sincere efforts in destroying the traditional image of women as sexual objects. Her protagonists break all sort of taboos on sex and prove to be assertive in this aspect. Shobha De and her female protagonists detest to think sex as something mechanical resulting in loveless and routine affair. This article titled, "A Study of Shobha De's *Sisters* from Feminist Perspective" attempts to analyse Shobha De's novel *Sisters* from feminist point of view.

Key words : female protagonists, liberated woman, parent-child relationship, urban world, male dominance and passiveness.

Shobha De made her debut in novel writing in 1989 thorough *Socialite Evenings* novel. After it, she wrote *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Strange Obsessions*, *Sultry Days* and *Snapshots*. Shobha De is of the opinion that there is a double standard of treatment prevailing in the society to boys and girls. Society offers one kind of treatment to boys and girls are offered an inferior kind of treatment. In this context, a question was raised to Shobha De regarding discrimination

between boys and girls with regard to treatment. She replied that there cannot be different set of rules for boys and girls. She says, “It has nothing to do with morality, but more with safety. Today I feel worried if my girls were to go out for a late night party because I have personally witnessed drunken driving on the road.” She also says, “ actually, it is far easier to understand the girls as a parent than the boys. My two boys want to be tycoons overnight, and they divide people in two categories... winners and losers! So I have to gently stop in and tell them some hard facts.” (Indian Express. 1999). The novels of Shobha De exhibit the efforts taken by the author in discovering India through Indian eyes. Her novels talk about the difficulties faced by the urban Indian women. In this context, Shobha De made a comment that, “ I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag. I feel very strongly about the woman’s situation.” (The Hindustan Times Magazine 12 Feb. : 3).

Among the novels of Shobha De, the novel *Sisters* is known for its racy prose style and it gives an intimate account of Mumbai city life. It is also an explosive novel. A liberated woman happens to be the protagonist of the novel and she suffers from a psychic conflict as she is caught between her personal and societal self. Of course, the theme of the novel is the struggle for identity by women in a male dominated society. It gives a vivid account of the sufferings of women in a society which is prejudiced towards women. In a society where there is an extreme bias towards women, they are treated only as objects. The novelist expresses her concern over the treated given to women in this kind of setup. In *Sisters* novel, Mikki Hiralal happens to be the protagonist and she faces hardship and in the end she is able to establish her identity. Mikki Hiralal is compelled to shift her abode from U.S. to India due to sudden demise of her parents in an air crash. She takes care of her father’s industries named Hiralal industries which are in shambles financially. She does not understand the reason behind her father’s industries becoming sick. She partially comes to know from media that her father was involved in a scam and had to borrow a loan of eighty crores.. Several people were of the opinion that her father was inundated with loans which caused his death. Therefore, Mikki decides to pay utmost care to her father’s industries.

Mikki was ready to experiment and go to any extent to revive her father’s industries. She cheerfully bore all trials and tribulations. She is a true representative of modern woman who is willing to shoulder responsibility and is ready to challenge and surmount any social obstacle

while carrying out any untraditional task. She wants to resurrect the industries financially. For that purpose, she is in need of huge money. Shanay, her cousin advises her to borrow money from Navin who is her fiancée. As advised, Mikki approaches Navin to help her financially. Within no time, she realizes that Navin is nothing but a puppet in his mother's hands. He takes no decision on his own and is not a self respecting individual. This quality in him infuriates Mikki. In the novel *Sisters*, Shobha De shows how women become victims to male passions. Mikki's father Seth Hiralal, though he is married, rapes his watchman's wife Sapna and makes her pregnant. When Sapna is forced to abort, she dies of it. Seth Hiralal also has a concubine named Leelaben and Alisha is the daughter due to this unholy relationship. Mikki marries Binny Malhotra who has a mistress and children. In spite of having a mistress and children, Binny Malhotra marries Mikki. He considers Mikki to be a beautiful rubber doll and never gives her any sort of independence and individuality. There are certain urban women who consider sex to be a sort of plaything. Alisha gets into sexual contact with Navin in spite of being aware of the fact that he was engaged to Mikki before. She feels that she could extract revenge on her sister by this manner. Likewise, her relationship with Dr.Kurien is purely physical since the doctor already has wife and children.

Shobha De is a feminist writer known for taking up issues pertaining to woman's liberation in a most challenging manner. In the process, she never hesitates to talk about sex and never considers it as a social taboo. In the novel, the readers come across a woman who faces all sort of challenges for being a woman. In the end, she attains success in her mission. Navin is the first man to come into her life. She permits him to have physical intimacy with her to a reasonable limit. Infact, she " allowed him to hold her in his arms and kiss her." (63). Yet, Mikki restrains him from taking advantage any further. She asks him to , " stop it". (63). Navin stopped at once and feigned innocence as if he did not wish to take advantage of it. He says that his amorous advance has been nothing but a test of her virginity and she came out of it in flying colours. They are betrothed within a short time. After their betrothal, it became a practice for Navin's mother to call her every morning to her house. This is not at all relished by Mikki and so she lodges a complaint to Navin who only laughs at it by stating that " mother-in -law problems already."(63). The callous attitude displayed by Navin makes Mikki shudder at the prospect of marrying him.

She wisely decides to cancel the betrothal and it stands cancelled. Among several women protagonists of Shobha De, Mikki happens to be the most decisive woman. She attains more mental maturity after her father's death. She is neither sex crazy nor misled. When it comes to taking decisions in her life, she proves to be very decisive. She is assertive, pragmatic and mentally stronger unlike the traditional women who are subdued and weaker. Mikki applies her wisdom when it comes to following practices prevailing in the society. Without any hesitation or guilt, she cancels her engagement. It is not easy to please Mikki. Certain individuals like Ramanbhai have tried to exert their assertiveness over her, but their efforts have proved to be in vain. He even tried to blackmail her emotionally by calling her "beti". But Mikki remained unimpressed. Though he discouraged her in attaining success in her mission of resurrecting her industries, Mikki was up to the challenging task. The author Shobha De expects the modern women to establish their identity by leading an independent life. Mikki was a confident, ambitious, greedy and lustful woman. She is an Indian by birth, but is inspired by qualities found among American women. In this context, Sarbani Sen opines that: "Shobha De is producing a *desi* version of an American best-seller where the Indian ambience is merely an eroticizing on an unmistakably American cake." (Sen 63).

Ramanbhai considers Mikki to be a modern woman who is well versed in facing the world which is "full of sharks." (31). Mikki very tactfully evaluates men folk. Even Shanny who is sincere in his relationship with Mikki knows that, "His love for his beautiful cousin was doomed." (42). Mikki keeps Shanay in her highest esteem. It was Shanay who brought out the information regarding the murder of her father. The female protagonists of Shobha De make their presence felt by ventilating their sexual fantasies without any social inhibition. Sexual affairs beyond the married life is not confined only to the aristocrat women. It is also there in the middle and lower strata of the society. This fact is made evident by the author through Taarini, a middle class woman. In fact, Taarini gives Mikki a rude shock through her straight forward approach in life. Through Taarini's character, Shobha De tries to challenge the male authority who consider sex to be a taboo for women. Towards this phallogocentric society, Mikki responds in an aggressive manner. Shobha De expresses her ideas through two characters namely Mikki and Alisha. Here, Mikki makes a planned assault on the patriarchal setup whereas Alisha is violent and hostile in her approach. Shobha De makes a true representation of how a woman ought to be. She does not nurture any kind of sentimentalism. She seems to be worried about her parents'

death in the beginning, but later on, she plunges straightaway into business. She wants to go back to US to revive her interrupted semester. Quite similar to the aspirations of Mikki, Alisha also wants to enjoy the huge fortune her father had left for her. Both of them are similar in not wasting much of time in mourning for the loss of their father. In this aspect, they very much resemble male feelings and their selfish motives.

Urban women do not nurture any sentiment about chastity and there are some women who consider men to be playthings. Alisha develops a physical contact with Navin even after knowing that he is engaged to Mikki. She feels as if she is extracting a kind of revenge on Mikki by having sex with her would be. Likewise, her relationship with Dr. Kurien is purely physical as the doctor is a married man with children. Mikki, Alisha, Urmila and Sapana belong to the urban class of the society. For them, men are only playthings. In the novel, the readers find Mikki being at loggerheads with her inner self. On one side, she is not willing to cross the boundaries of traditional Indian women. On the other side, she gets transformed into a matured woman and shows her consideration for her estranged sister. It used to be a practice of the author to show the working class women to be more stronger than the urbanites. In the novel *Sisters*, Taarini hails from a middle class family and she is employed in Bhavana's office. She is in love with Shashi though he is married. Shobha De makes a telling commentary of the disinteresting parent-child relationship in the urban world. It is very much evident when the readers find Leelaben struggling for her life in the hospital whereas her daughter Alisha is seen making merriment in a nightclub with Navin. Alisha is financially sound enough to spend on her mother's treatment, yet she has no desire to do it. Alisha represents angry young women and only the death of Seth Hiralal could shake her mentally as she happens to be another daughter of the deceased.

The major theme of the novel is the effort taken by Mikki to get back her sister Alisha who aspires to become rich. The novel has a happy ending with Alisha and Mikki getting reconciled with each other. "the sunlight came pouring into the room through enormous bay windows of Mikki's and Alisha's beautiful home, bathing the two sisters in its golden glow. Mikki surrendered to its warm embrace as her fingers played tenderly with the silken tresses of her sister's hair, and she drifted off into a light sleep full of dreams the future shimmered tantalizingly before her half closed eyes... and Mikki reached out her hand to touch it." (217). Mikki takes initiative to get reconciled with her sister. It takes considerable time and effort to

win Alisha back to her side. Mikki being realistic in her approach is not content with leading a selfish and egoistic life. Due to this attitude, she attends to the funeral of Binny Malhotra, her husband, without any hesitation. In the end, the sisters decide to shift their abode to London. Their departure is a symbolic way of expressing their departure from the corrupt business world. They move out for a total transformation of life. The novel ends with an epilogue and touches the vital chords of the readers' minds.

In the novel, for Shobha De, a woman is a symptom for female's defiance on male-regulated female sexuality. Sex is employed as a tool by the author as well as her female characters who try to exert their authority over male dominance in the society. Through it, they create an awakening among women to beware of male exploitation. Though marriage as an institution is considered sacrosanct, Shobha De does not feel so. She redefines marriage and denounces the fact that women need to be subservient to men. Instead of being pure, chaste and devoted to the life partner, Shobha De expects women to have total freedom in sex. Her novels make a realistic portrayal of things happening in an aristocratic society. When it comes to sex, Shobha De wants women to be on par with men. When she was questioned about the autobiographical elements in the novel, she frowned at the curiosity shown by men in knowing about the personal life of women. In a society where sex is considered as a privilege of men, it is Shobha De who makes a serious dent on this false belief. For her, sex happens to be a tool to beat men folk. She is the one and only one female writer who talks about it in a frank manner in her novels.

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