

---

## THEME OF 'QUEST FOR SELF IDENTITY' IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE: A PERSPECTIVE STUDY

---

**K.V.S.MAHESWARA RAO**

Lecture in English

A.M.A.L.College

Anakapalle

Visakhapatnam District

Andhra Pradesh

---

### Abstract

Shobha De is considered to be one of the prominent modern Indian women novelists in Indian Writing in English. She has the deep vision of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology. Shobha De was born in Maharashtra in 1948 and was educated in Delhi and Bombay. She obtained a degree in Psychology from St.Xavier's College, Bombay. She began her career in Journalism in the year 1970. She is a freelance writer and columnist for several newspapers and magazines. In 1988, she entered the literary limelight in India by writing her first novel, *Socialite Evenings*. Most of the women characters depicted by Shobha De are economically independent and socially uninhibited who are conscious of their self-respect. The women protagonists in her novels are enterprising, bold, innovative and ever ready to face challenges. Being feminist De's novels raise a strong protest against the male dominated Indian society. Women are considered as mere shadows of men and treated as the other. They are not accepted as equal to men. However, in this fast changing world, the role of women in the society too, has been changing fast and affecting greatly the social norms prevalent in the society. De is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women in the society. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. She does not believe in depicting her women protagonists as slaves. But she is the first to explore the world of urban women of higher social strata. In urban area male dominance is no longer acceptable as women have started thinking for their own self. A closer study of her novels reveals her protest against the image of woman as an auxiliary. She destroys this distorted and deteriorated image of woman and therefore, the women protagonists in her novels appear more powerful and crave for their quest for self identity in the society where the men dominate.

**Keywords:** Subdued, Uninhibited, Marginalization, Hegemony, Protagonists, Acceptable, Distorted and Self Identity.

The cartography of Indian Women fiction throws light on the evolution of Indian Writing in English as a newfangled discipline which is gradually emerging as an autonomous area of study. It describes the journey of Indian writers, how they have been depicting the contemporary issues at length in their fiction. The Indian women novelists in English have contributed much by delving deep into the psyche of woman, which makes her as potent personality to face any sort of identity problem in the male dominated society. The policies of globalization bring forth a sudden and immediate change in the attitude of woman towards living her own life as per her own self identity.

The modern culture allows woman to enjoy unlimited freedom out of which she is able to delve into unexplored areas of her own self and society in order to experience psychological self satisfaction. As a feminist novelist Shobha De has worked for the complete emancipation of woman but she is feminist of another kind, one who projects the ideas of liberating woman through self-actualization and the acceptance.

De's women characters are strong in their will, their choice and character. They take unusually bold decisions, assert their individuality, in order to survive in society. Basically her women are hasty in their decision, impulsive in their thinking and instinctive in their reaction a spur of the moment. They are errant, erratic in their behavior. Their vision of the world, false notions of the world, which sometimes leads to alienation and subsequent trials and tribulations they have to tolerate. These women represent new in character and essence.

In Shobha De's first novel, *Socialite Evenings*, she describes the journey of a prominent Mumbai socialite Karuna from a middle-class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna's life can be divided into three phases – life before marriage, married life, and life after the separation from her husband. In all these three phases of her life readers notice the rebellious instinct. In her childhood days she was the only child with a discipline problem both at home and at school. For example, she didn't like going to school by train or a double-decker bus. While other girls dressed in smart terry cot uniforms, she wore her sash hipster-style. Her sisters preferred to concentrate on their percentages whereas she preferred to discover Bombay and Bombazines. Naturally, as she grew up there developed in her the emotional urge to identify with the outside world, the modern crowd and the fascinating world of affluent girls who had everything. She was not interested in her studies and also acted as a model for ad agency much against her father's will. It has been the desire of Karuna to get rid of her middle class background and shabbiness of her life as the daughter of a middle rung government official.

At this juncture Karuna meets Anjali a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Anjali is an independent lady, rich, confident and beautiful. She has everything the modern woman needed. Moreover, she belongs to the world of fashion designing and advertising. This example of Anjali makes Karuna to think that the fashion world can bring wealth, freedom and status in her life and would help her to fulfill all her desires. So she freely indulges in the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, the middle-aged prominent socialite. Karuna's very entry in the glamorous world of modeling and friendship with her boy friend Bunty, is the act of rebellion against the established traditional norms of patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Karuna's psyche develops through protest and defiance. In this patriarchal society, man can only think about his life without woman but a woman cannot do the same. Some women mutely tolerate this situation and spend their whole life in suffocated atmosphere. But Shobha De's women are different as they do not meekly accept their subordinate position.

The struggle of Karuna, therefore, does not remain confined only to her but becomes representative struggle of the modern women to be free and self-reliant. After her divorce, her husband meets her to express his regret and ask her to come back and live with him. But Karuna's response is shocking and unexpected because she firmly asks her husband to go away. It is a powerful jolt to the patriarchal man. She even verbally abuses her husband when he comes with the proposal to remarry her. There always been a contrast between Karuna and her mother in their attitude towards the institution of marriage. Her traditional mother advises Karuna to marry the right person. But she refuses to conform to the traditional image of woman

anymore that why she rebels against the patriarchal system. She resents, resists and rejects male dominance. Her statements reflect her desire for the affirmation of herself. She wants to destroy the gender discrimination – the real source of women's oppression and create a new society in which there will be no place for inequality between men and women. It is in this respect that Karuna differs considerably from Anjali and Ritu, the two other important women characters in the novel.

Anjali and Ritu, like Karuna, do not challenge the patriarchal system. These women are liberated individuals in search of their self-identity. R. Morgon (1983: 143) 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". The novelist presents these modern women having courage to revolt and refuse being puppets in the hands of men in the name of tradition and society.

Shobha Dewas closely associated with the world of Mumbai Cinema. She knows well about the dark life behind the screen, with all its ugly, dirty details. Her novel *Starry Nights* explores the hardcore realities in the movie world. All the women characters presented in the novel such as Aasha Rani, Sudha Rani, Rita and Malini, in one way or the other are related to the world of films. These women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. They live for themselves, fight, and revolt and shape their destiny and self identity.

Shobha De's women protagonists do not believe in suffering submissively, they use all the means to achieve joy and success in life. The women struggle hard to turn the tide in their favor. 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. She rebels against the existing moral codes and social norms. She has acquired enough courage and strength to fight and challenge injustice.

Aasha Rani, the protagonist of the novel suffered in her childhood due to the lack of parental love, care, protection and an emotional security. She cannot enjoy her childhood because of her father. These results in her hate so much so that she refuses to see even her ill father. Now whenever she recalls her past, the painful and bitter memories of her lost childhood torture her mind. Naturally she hates her father which is thus revealed when Aasha Rani tells her sister Sudha about her father. Aasha Rani also vents a rebellious protest against her own overpowering selfish mother who looks at her daughter as a source of income. She bursts out: 'Money, money, money. That is all you think of. Well, I am fed up of being your money machine. I have done enough for everybody – you, Sudha and the others – Now I want to live for myself and enjoy life' (SN 183).

Shobha De's novels do not accept meekly the marginalization of miserable, pathetic and suffering women. They asserted their individuality in many different ways. Instead of passively accepting their miserable lot, these women struggle, fight, protest and challenge the male dominance. Aasha Rani expresses her hatred for the men who exploited her. She tells Kishenbhai bitterly about her future strategy in defying men, "All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all beat you at your own game!"(SN13). Further, her betrayal by Akshay Arora is the most bitter and traumatic experience. As despaired by frustration, she tries to commit suicide. But in her attempt, she fortunately survives.

Aasha Rani's mother Geetha Devi tries to comfort her. She tells her that as Kishenbhai is there to help them, they need not worry. In fact, Kishenbhai, a small film distributor, is the first

exploiter of Aasha Rani in the film industry. Therefore, the moment her mother utters his name, all the past unpleasant memories rush to her mind. She gets furious and tells her mother, “I hate him’... I hate him for getting me into the industry, for ruining my life. I will never forgive him, never”(SN 193-94). This voice of Aasha Rani represents the different ways of protest registered by women against their oppression and exploitation in a patriarchal social set up. Henceforth Aasha Rani, rather strong in character, takes bold decisions to survive in society. She has a composite energy of production, protection and love, both earthly and sexual. Her suffering, exploitation, humiliation, oppression and even separation from her husband, do not control her desire to live a life of her own. She breaks all sexual mores and social norms by her unusual and deviant behavior. Her sexual encounters with different men such as Kishenbhai, a small film distributor, Akshay Arora, a top film-star and true representative of patriarchy, Sheth Amirchand, a Member of Parliament, Linda, a journalist and a lesbian, Abhijit Mehra, son of an industrialist Amrish Mehra, Jojo, a film producer and Gopalakrishnan, a Tamil businessman point out her sexual aggression. She defeats them at their own game, and demolishes the mythical image of woman imposed by the patriarchal structure.

Hence, in *Starry Nights* Shobha De’s women such as Aasha Rani, Rita, Linda, Shonali and others frankly discuss and practice sex. The woman like Aasha Rani enslaves the men and becomes successful. In her journey of life, Sasha Rani succeeds to maintain her self-respect and identity though she is distracted from the main stream of moral values giving new definition for it. De’s women have a typical sexual behaviour as a way of protest and try to establish an autonomous identity. In this respect, Shobha De differs from other Indian women novelists who have portrayed rural, self-sacrificing and traditional women. Contrasts to this, Shobha De’s women are bold, rebellious and at the same time actively involved with the changing roles life has offered to them. They protest against their exploitation in society and strive to assert their identity. In this context S. P. Swain(1999:133)says, Shobha De’s women symbolize: “the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality that characterize the modern age. Shobha De (The Hindu, Feb. 2, 1997) observes: It is not enough to have mind of your own, if you don’t have income to match ... with this economic freedom has come assertiveness, confidence and refusal to be treated as doormats.

Shobha De’s novel *Second Thoughts* depicts the saga of a middle class Bengali girl Maya who is trapped in arranged marriage with Ranjan Malik. It is a bitter-sweet love story of the marital life of Ranjan Malik and Maya. It is through this story of love and betrayal Shobha De exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy of Indian marriage system. The story depicts the over-bearing female characters and weak male characters. It is not only in *Second Thoughts* but in almost all the novels of De that the male characters are portrayed as weaker than the female characters.

Chitra, Maya’s mother, is a typical Indian woman. On a careful study, it reveals that she represents the traditional outlook of a mother in Indian society. Maya wants to complete her studies but Chitra realizes that a foreign returned boy would get “snapped before you and I can blink our eyes” (ST 3). At the first meeting with the members of Malik family Chitra drops a hint that the girl is willing to pursue her career in textile design. Though Maya is a ‘trained textile designer’, they did not allow her to take up a job. They appear to be modern but are too traditional in their outlook. Therefore, Maya protests:“How could they tell me not to work after marriage? Do any educated trained girls stay at home these days? I didn’t like that remark” (ST 13).

Maya confronts her husband with the grim reality of her position: “The truth, dear Mr. Malik, is that you have me here as a fulltime, domestic servant without pay. Shall I tell your colleagues

that? And also tell them that you have forbidden me from pursuing a career – even a part-time one” (ST 154). Mrs. Malik is rich and seems quite modern. Though she appears influential, she is, like her son Ranjan, too traditional in her attitude. Both Chitra and Mrs. Malik inculcate the set rules in the minds of Maya and Ranjan much before they get married. But it is more due to the pressure of the deep rooted tradition on one hand and exposure to the modern education and the contemporary social trends on the other, that they both find it difficult to establish harmony between them. Maya cannot feel a sense of belonging. She feels utterly neglected and alienated as she cannot get the confidence to call the house her own. She admits: “It was never a home. My home. Our home. Always ‘the house’—impersonal, distant, cold. Home continued to be Calcutta. My parental home”(ST 227). Maya feels that she neither belongs to her husband nor to her parents.

Nikhil Verma, a college-going neighbor, who gently persuades Maya to get real and act real. He tells her about the meaninglessness of silent suffering. Nikhil's constant encouragement makes her a little bold. Once it had enabled Maya to rebel against Ranjan though it was her silent rebellion. She says:“I could hear the phone ringing outside. Defiantly, I decided to let it go on ringing. It had to be Ranjan checking on whether I had run the assigned errands successfully. I heard him ring off finally and felt triumphant, as though I had defied his edict and got away with my little rebellion” (ST 100). Again one day she enters into the bedroom while Ranjan is engaged in a phone call to his mother and feels thrilled to have “ruined his concentration” (102) by her unwanted presence. She slowly becomes bold and allows Nikhil to visit her. With the passage of time Nikhil is successful in creating a place for him in Maya's heart. As a result, Maya develops a brief but explosive and passionate friendship with Nikhil. Maya is so depressed and frustrated that soon she establishes an extra-marital relationship with him and at last breaks the long silence. Now even with a little encouragement from Nikhil, she is ready to say goodbye to her “uninspiring, life without the slightest regret” (171). But though Maya takes this bold step, she feels a sense of guilt as she breaks the set norms. At this time, she learns about Nikhil's engagement with a Delhi-based girl which shatters her dream completely. On second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Mumbai, but also of her marriage.

Shobha De projects men's pride, incompatible marriages, and traditional norms of behavior and patriarchal social system as the real forces of the oppression of women in her fictional world. The novelist concentrates on developing women characters that are comparatively much freer from moral and social restrictions than the ordinary, submissive and docile women. These characters do not represent the common lot of women but their behavior indicates the emerging trends in contemporary Indian metropolitans.

To sum up, we can say that Shobha De makes an attempt to reveal the inner self of a woman in the urban milieu. Her novels explore the reality concealed in the lives of women. She depicts a true picture of new woman, unveiling different shades of her life, searching for self identity in an absurd and oppressive world. She depicts modern, educated, career oriented upper class women who are delicate to eternal changing times and situations. Her women revolt against the traditional image of Indian women. Her woman is a mouthpiece of the New Indian Woman who shares the vision of many women like herself. Shobha De's women are far more assertive and they rebel against their men seeking considerable self identity and unlimited freedom. Her portrayals are very much true to life. Whatever she has created reflects the true image of the new woman and the society she lives in. De's presentation of women belonging to this society is that of a rebel who does not conform either to tradition or to modernity but chooses to attain

her oneself identity.

**Reference:**

- De, Shobha. *Socialite Evenings* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989).
- De, Shobha. *Starry Nights* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992).
- De, Shobha. *Second Thoughts* (New Delhi: Penguin Books).
- De, Shobha. *The Hindu*, Feb. 2, 1997.
- J. Agnihotri Gupta, "Feminist Utopias – Strategies for Women's Empowerment". Gender and Literature Ed. Iqbal Kaur. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1992.
- K. K. Sinha, *The Commonwealth Review IX 2* (1997-1998), *Socialite Evenings*, 1989.
- Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* (New York: Dell, 1987) Shantha Krishnaswamy, *The Women in Indian Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1984).
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: The New English Library, 1966).
- S. P. Swain, "Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* – A Feminist Study". *Feminist English Literature*. Ed. Manmohan K. Bhatnagar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1999.