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FEMINIST WOMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF SHOBA DE

Ms. Jyothsna Lavanya  
Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Telangana University,  
Nizamabad District,  
Telangana State,  
India

ABSTRACT  
The women writers of Indian-English literature have provided many shades of urban and rural women, touching the different aspects of their life and society. Authors like Kamla Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamla Markandaya, Shobha De have tried to present the physical and psychological aspect of woman and started the movement of consciousness in female writers with more emphatic voice and boldness which we find in the writings of Shobha De. She has mixed response of Indian minds. Picaresque elements loom large in her fiction. In fact her novels seem to be a modernized version of the nineteenth century picaresque fiction. The picaroon in her fiction is a woman who wanders from place to place in search of more fulfilling experiences. She tries to shatter the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society, her characters moves from the Feminist towards the Female phase, i.e. from the stage of protest towards the process of self-discovery.

KEYWORDS: Feminist, Picaresque, Picaroon, Self-Discovery.

DISCUSSION  
“The situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all creatures finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.”

-Simon de Beauvoir

Indian-English literature has produced a galaxy of women writers touching various facets of women’s life. While writers like Kamla Das touch the physical aspect of human relationships, Anita Desai focus is on the psychological one. In Bharathi Mukherjee it is a question of identity. Thus the movement as mere which had started as mere ‘consciousness’ in writers like Kamala Markandaya, has now assumed a more emphatic voice in writers like Shobha De.

Shobha De, the very name evokes a mixed response in the Indian minds. Her advent upon the literary scene in 1988 with Socialite Evenings, followed by Starry Nights (1990), Sisters, Strange Obsession (1992), Sultry Days (1994), Snapshots (1994), Surviving Men (1997) and many more works later, has created hullabaloo in the Indian literary scene. Popularly known as the Jackie Collins of India, her popularity lies in the contents, mastery over the art of storytelling and ease in her use of the language. Picaresque elements loom large in her fiction. In fact her novels seem a modernized version of the nineteenth century picaresque fiction. The
Shobha De has presented Karuna who does not want to play like the hoax any more. She has learnt from her male counterpart to conceal or reveals per convenience, not only this but also that Divorce is no more a Death-Word for her. Instead, she has learnt to manage her own affairs and learnt to walk out or give a slip here and there rather squeeze the life out of a family life of pungent atmosphere where she has no identity, no choice whatsoever;

“Divorce Isn’t such a dirty word anymore. I’m sure my father-in-law would feel pretty relieved. Maybe the husband, too. I’ve always felt like such an impostor in the house.” (p.52)

This shows that modern life has produced fragmented individuals. People are becoming more and more isolated now, but the struggle for existence, the battle of survival is on its full swing. As we can see Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*, she takes upon her memoirs to escape humiliation or rejection perpetrated by failed marriage.

When it comes to survival and identity, the woman of Shobha De takes course to other ways, like in *Starry nights*, (1991) focuses on teenage girl Aasha Rani trapped in the showbiz society: a story of survival and the glamour of show biz are used in the novel. Aasha Rani, born in an Iyengar father and a supporting artist is the sole prop of her family ever since at the age of six, and ruthlessly pushes her into pornographic films at the age of twelve. During her teens Aasha is again thrown into the Mumbai film industry, and there she was exploited in multiple ways through various characters. In fact, we can say that the book is about a young girl who is ‘sexexploited’ by members of the shiny flecks world. Whether it is Kisanbhai Seth, Amirchand, Akshay, Abhijit, Linda or even her Appa, Amma and Sudha Rani, her ultimate aim is to use devious means to exploit the protagonist. It is to Kisanbhai that she speaks of her brazen childhood memories:

After her experience with Kisanbhai she understands that she is merely the first of her ‘sexexploiter’. From then onwards her heart attains a state of nullification. Shobha de describes her physical and mental condition as: “after that experience……she didn’t even bother to look at the man’s face or body. She just ceased to react. What difference does it make who he was and he did?” (p.248) the sexual encounter with Seth Amirchand presents the barbeque picture of the glamour society. Even her journalist friend Linda exploits her through a lesbian relationship. The only person who touches the heart is Akshay. Consequently when Akshay also turns away from her, she elopes with Abhijit to New Zealand, only to be deserted by him in an alien country. It is here that she meets Jamie Philips. Within a week they are married and a daughter Saasha is born to them. The joys of motherhood add a special glow to Aasha Rani’s charm. Her visit to Bombay after a gap of five years alters the balance of her life. At the behest of her husband she agrees to re-enter the film world. Her heart is filled with a sense of gratitude as she looks back at the affection, warmth and security, and here again she found her identity, and said to jay who had showered upon her wounded heart:

“Jay…..in a way you saved my life…..I was sick of living. Sick of deception….And I too had lost my head and become a loose woman. You never questioned me about my
past…you showed me that another life was possible for women like me.” (355)

Towards the end of the book we see her in a mood of reconciliation with the members of her family. Aasha Rani tries to revive her father’s studios and also dreams of making her daughter the future ‘golden girl’ on the silver screen.

High stakes, ambition, lust and greed also form a part of our lives. De’s Small Betrayal presents the woman in the driver’s seat. Manisha, in the novel consistently discouraged Mohan’s fantasies. Mohan falls in love with her and he thinks that she will also love him but in the end, we find that it was Manisha actually who decided to reject Mohan. Not only has this De made a bold and innovative attempt to portray lesbianism in Strange Obsession. A gorgeous young super model Amrita Aggarwal, conquers the glamour world of Mumbai. She rises to the zenith, unaware of her female lover Minx (Meenakshi Iyengar) who helps her unobtrusively just for carnal pleasures, passion-quenching. Though forced to give in at times, Amrita passes through nightmarish experiences on account of the extreme demands of her unwelcome suitor who even traces the couple (Rakesh and Amrita) in the bridal suite of the Oberoi Hotel on the night of their wedding and even in the honeymoon cottage in the Nanital. De observes commendation for bringing out the woman to woman relationship in vivid detail with passions running through tumultuous weather and desperation to the finale of bringing about Minx’s death under tragic circumstances. Actually she has not gone into psycho-analytical details perhaps she has preferred to give the novel a radically feminist turn, giving freedom and victory to Amrita, the exploited soul from the exploiter.

Shobha De Sisters, is the sorory of two sisters who are not only beautiful and wealthy but are also at war with each other. Mikki is the legitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal while alisha is Seth Hiralal’s daughter born through relationship with Leelabhen. Mikki and Alisha who are the worst enemies initially, but later turning out to be the best friends. Mikki initially agrees to marry Navin with the hope that he would support her to save her father’s industries. The moment she realizes that he would be calculator obsessed with the balancing and budgeting and cold husband she dedicates herself to Nikhil, a college going neighbour Nikhil in order to keep her ‘self’ her individuality intact and restore calmness to her yearning soul. Ms De here has tried to present the plight of the New Woman who is concerned in a maze of domestic chores and ignored p...
“I lay awake all night dreaming of a large bird swooping down on me, claws out. Other than the odd mole hunt my body remained uncharted territory.”

So, the consummation of Maya’s simmering love for Nikhil does not come unexpectedly. The incubation period is over, the New Woman steps out as bold, fearless, uncaring and looking ahead. It is a ray of hope for her: a new way to live, new promises of life to keep. Actually the second thoughts that arise in Maya’s mind could very well be the first harbinger of the first thoughts that could come to the mind of the New Woman of the future who has to take decisions to assert her individuality and establish her identity.

Allied to the issue of marriage is the issue of sex in Shobha De’s novels. In her novel we find all her women have pre-marital sex. Sex is no longer a taboo to her women. There is a great deal of sexual freedom in her women. Even marriage does not curtail sexual freedom, not only this we find the moment their marriages fail, her woman go out in search of more fulfilling relationships. Through her novels, De seeks to establish the fact that woman has the same feelings, passions, aspirations and values as a man and she is determined to fight it out for realizing her dreams. We can say that she has tried to portray that ambition is not the monopoly of the men only. Even women can be ambitious and they also reach that heights which they decide to assert themselves. The woman wants to take charge, to locate her identity, but she continues the search for her identity for herself and the real.

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