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**AN ANALYSIS UPON SOCIAL COMPLEXITY AND
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An Analysis upon Social Complexity and Feminism in the Creations of Shobha De's Novels: A Critical Study

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Abstract – Shobha De is a widely known outspoken journalist and best-selling Indian writer. Her explosive autobiography, *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life* reveals her true self behind the public personality. She candidly writes about the choices she made, decisions she took, and the influences that shaped her. It is amazing for the openness with which it captures the essence of a fascinating woman who has become a legend in her own time.

Shobha De does not require an introduction. She is an eminent novelist and columnist of contemporary India, a living legend, who has penned down several popular novels; and has here by proved that she possesses an extraordinary degree of creativity and stamina. She belongs to that group of contemporary writers of English literature who supports feminism and equality between a man and woman. Feminism, its various aspects and gender equality are the main themes of the writings of Shobha De. She mainly deals with issues concerning the modern society.

Shobha De's maiden novel *Socialite Evenings* has been critically acclaimed and considered a masterpiece in the realm of Feminism. Her second novel *Starry Nights* took the reading world with storm, establishing her reputation as a Popular Culture writer.

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INTRODUCTION

Shobha De is one of the India's top most selling authors. She is one of the India's biggest ethnic icons and effortlessly walk in anyone's list. Shobha De, the dynamic character and journalist observed the glamorous world of modeling, films and high society. She is a social reviewer and a writer. She has written fifteen books till now, the first seven of them being novels – *Socialite Evenings* (1988), *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996). Her non-fictional books are *Uncertain Liaisons* (co-edited with Kushwant Singh)(1993), *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings* (1994), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Surviving Men* (1997), *Selective Memory* (1998), *Speed Post* (2000), *Spouse* (2004) and *Super India* (2008). She has also written for Television serials, *Swabhiman*, *Kitty Party* and *Sukanya*. She is a free-lance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines. Four of Shobha De's novels are contained in the post graduate popular culture curriculum of University of London. From *Socialite Evenings* to *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De has certainly evolved as a sensitive writer and dedicated feminist. In all the earlier novels, she dealt with the valueless, moral less world of high

society. In this novel, she selects the middle class society and the mute suffering of so many married women.

As a writer, she is skilled with amazing ability to discuss the sensitive aspects of human life and human association delicately. The power of her narration is just brilliant. She is totally different from other Indian women novelists in English. She is gifted with warm understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. Her novels expose the pointlessness of marital relations in elite class. Her novels contain frank description of sex life. For that she is criticized as "Vatsyayani" "Soft porn queen" "Pasha of pulp" "Vamp Feminist", etc. and has never been considered as a serious writer. But a serious reading of her novels shows that she is a sensitive and serious writer. She is an author who dared to unearth those issues of man-woman relationship which were never put to public by any woman writer. From *Socialite Evenings* to *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De discusses the problems of women in patriarchal society, man-woman relationship, lesbian and homosexual relationship and the advent of live-in-relationship. Through her novels, she makes her readers to introspect about fast fading love, pleasure and satisfaction in martial relations. In all the earlier

novels she dealt with the valueless, moral less world of high society. In *Second Thoughts* she selects the middle class society and the suffering of so many married women due to traditional arrange marriage system.

Second Thoughts (1996) is the seventh novel of Shobha De. It describes the agony of Maya, who feels imprisoned in matrimony. Jaydipsinh Dodiya comments that the theme of novel focuses on "the hollowness of Indian marriage". De explores the female psyche against male ego, the obedient wife, the arrogant mother-in-law, the social pretense and public facades in *Second Thoughts*.

Shobha De has become the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. These women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit. Marriage for them is an insurance against social values. Her novels can be thematically classified into three groups: firstly, *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts* are the novels that deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, quest for Identity, struggle for survival and marginality. Secondly, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* (1992) move around the life in film industry, Bollywood and concentrate basically on lust and sex. And finally, the novels *Sultry Days* (1994) and *Snapshots* (1995) present them anticipation of women and project the ultra-modern lifestyle of neo-rich people.

Shobha De's fiction portrays the contemporary reality of the rich elite people whether they are rich businessman, politicians, Bollywood actors, producers, doctors and industrialists. She delves deep into the hearts of the people and exposes the reality to the world without aiming to harm anyone. She is straight forward and talks with guts and fearlessness focusing her work to rule out the dangers developing in the society and to bring the awareness in the society. Her work is unique, innovative and interesting. De is a true artist who judges the demand of her modern characters. She is the first among the feminists who lifted the condition of modern elite females of contemporary India. An alliance with a man grants a woman heterosexual privileges, many of which are redefined by the law; religion and families. But, the woman has to pay its price at her own cost, since she has to destroy herself, her voice, intellect, and personal development, for a man's need, in these alliances. Thus, Shobha De rejects compulsory heterosexuality and suggests woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to woman relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. She also refuses to participate in the game of competition for man. She confronts her own sexuality

and challenges the norms placed upon her by culture or society.

THE MAKING OF SHOBHA DE

Shobha De (b.1948), born in a typical middle-class Maharashtrian family, educated in Delhi and Mumbai, has emerged as a major novelist on the Indian literary scene. However, the birth of Shobha De has not been a day of celebration for the family. Instead, it caused dejection and disappointment particularly to the grandmother and the mother, as they had expected son. They looked at her as an additional liability. Her sister Kunda, six then, had no idea that it was only the birth of a son that called for celebration in her mother's family. She had been told that her elder sister Mandakini had had an auspicious kumkum hand impression imprinted on her back, to commemorate her brother Ashok's birth. Innocently, she had demanded the same privilege for Shobha, to which her grandmother had scornfully said (1998: 13) "What? You want kumkum on your back? Go and fetch some cow-dung instead. Do you realize there are three daughters in the family now? Three. Weren't two enough?" Thus very early in life Shobha De had witnessed and experienced humiliation of gender discrimination.

Shobha De has been many things to many people : a super model, celebrity journalist, magazine editor, columnist, wife, mother, social commentator and TV scriptwriter. In fact, she wears many hats. Her latest one is of fashion designer. But above all she is the most popular Indian woman writer writing in English. Most of her books are best sellers as she realistically projects the image of the upper-class woman of contemporary India. She is a gifted writer having an extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular. In other words, the time-tested populist ingredient of sex and a tempestuous style contributed to her making as one of the most popular writers today. Within the span of just fifteen years she has produced fourteen books. She appeared on the Indian literary scene with the publication of her first novel *Socialite Evenings* in 1989.

From *Socialite Evenings* to the recent non-fiction *Spouse : The Truth About Marriage* (2005) and *Superstar India* (2008), she has certainly evolved as a sensitive woman writer. The modern Indian woman at the core of her fiction is the most important feature of her writing. Though her writing consists of novels, stories, letters, essays and an autobiography, she is more known as a modern Indian woman novelist than anything else. Her fictional output consists of seven novels, *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996). As a creative writer she occupies a significant place in the history of Indian novel in English.

Socialite Evenings is the first novel of Shobha De which depicts different modes of human nature. The principal character Karuna reveals her childhood experiences and also new experiences in the company of Anjali and Charlie. Karuna was in her childhood days, a problem child both at home and at school. She refused all the traditional ways that come in the way of the total development of a woman. As she grows up, there develops the emotional urge in her to identify herself with the outside world and the girls of her age who had everything as per their wish in their life. To fulfill her urge she turned to modeling and established friendship with Anjali, a prominent Mumbai socialite. Through her association with Anjali Karuna realizes that Anjali was not happy with her brutal and boorish husband. One day, Karuna drove along with Anjali and Abe to attend party in their 'beach car'. Abe enjoyed the party whereas Anjali and Karuna went for swimming. Suddenly Karuna felt shy because her shift floated upto her neck and her bright red panties were in view.

One of Anjali's friends mentioned this pleasant view to Karuna. But Anjali was furious not because of Abe's misbehavior with other woman but because of the scene in water, which was noticed by her friend. Anjali was in love with that person. Due to this incident, Karuna went away from Anjali to New York. Later, after returning from New York she broke her engagement with Bunt.

The institutions of family and marriage have come under tremendous strain in the modern times, primarily in the western culture and in the rich strata of the Indian society. *Socialite Evenings* presents the crumbling families and marriages of the different women characters in the novel. The definition of the institution of marriage gets new interpretation in the context of Shobha De's discussion. It grants complete sexual freedom to women with no bondage of marital relationship.

Aasha Rani the protagonist of *Starry Nights* is a beautiful film star and a daughter of renowned film producer of Madras. Her father abandoned Aasha Rani with her sister and mother. Consequently in her early teens Aasha Rani was pushed by her mother in the never ending gluttony of pornographic films to be exploited.

Shobha De's novel *Sisters*, written in 1992, reveals the relation between two sisters – Mikki and Alisha. It opens with a news headline: "Industrialist and wife die in air mishap", on the front page of The Times of India. Just a few miles away from Mikki, in a small suburb of Mumbai, another pair of young eyes was scrutinizing the same paper. Her name was Alisha, the illegitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal. Hiralal Industry lost its master Seth Hiralal and his wife.

Mikki, their only daughter, suddenly found herself the owner of the sprawling Hiralal Industrial Empire. Abandoning her studies in the United States, she returned to Mumbai. She found the business in a mess, almost bankrupt. She could turn for help, the beautiful Alisha, her half-sister. But Alisha did not accept Mikki as her sister. She was jealous of Mikki for Mikki had all the facilities that a daughter needed. All her needs were catered for by her parents and she was sent even abroad for further education. Alisha also dreamt of going abroad for her education but after Seth Hiralal's death her dream remained unfulfilled. Later, Ramanbhai informed Alisha that her father had left all the cash money to her and all the debts to Mikki.

Strange Obsession opens on Amrita's leaving of Delhi the safety of hearth and home, and a family she loves, to enter the treacherous world of Mumbai modelling. Being a model Amrita was crazy about clothes. She had great fascination for fashionable clothes. She would always like to dress in well attire especially her favourite – Guess jeans and a black Gap T-shirt. According to her mother it was natural for an attractive, ambitious and glamorous model to have the best.

Shobha De's *Sultry Days* opens with the filmy-style girl meets -boy in a College-canteen episode. The boy named Deb who was also known as God – a literal translation of his name indicated his domineering personality in the college. He was attractive in a repulsive manner. Nisha, the narrator-protagonist was attracted towards him.

The novel *Snapshots* represents a snatched moment in time. It links the six characters together as they also link their past to the present. Shobha De uses the technique of exploring the lives of individuals within a closed environment for a brief period of time, so that there are different stories of the different characters that make up a mosaic. All the women shared sexual pleasure with other men than their husbands but without guilt. Each one of the woman is trapped by a patriarchal society from which there is no escape except through protest. Thus the archetypal role of a woman has been radically altered and women with increased awareness of gender roles and gender identity have emerged.

Thematically these novels can be classified into the following three groups : firstly, *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts* are the novels that deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, Search for Identity, Struggle for Survival and Marginality.

Secondly, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* move around the life in film industry, Bollywood - lust and sex. And finally, the novels *Sultry Days* and *Snapshots* present the emancipation

of women and project the ultra-modern life-style of Neo-rich people.

As a woman novelist, Shobha De has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. She has great understanding of the depth of the psyche of woman and her problems. She explores the world of urban woman and emphatically says that even in the modern times with all socio-political as well as economic achievements; the graph of woman exploitation is shockingly rising.

SHOBHA DE: A WOMAN EMPOWERED

Shobha De, the prominent and cosmopolitan woman writer in English literature known for her flamboyant feminist approaches is a best seller. She is a pioneer in the world of popular fiction ranks the first to explore the ecstasies and vicissitudes of the urban woman. She portrays the sensitive aspect of human life in an extraordinary way, through her wonderful narrating prowess, of human aspects of life with frankness, precision and with an open heart.

When compared to contemporary women writers, De is really special. She gave much significance to women's issues which are dealt with psychology in a way of understanding unique to her. She hails the new Indian woman, ready to defy the organized moral institutional orthodoxy of the Indian society, searching for identity in her own unique way.

Her feminine characters break the manacles of traditions and customs that tie them in the predicaments and rule in their freedoms and rights. They are not entirely against the social system but refuse to accept it as it is. This confirms her place as a feminist.

Selective Memory: Stories from My Life (1998) serves as a source to understand the intimate details of Shobha De's life. Though De cannot unveil all the secrets of her life, she has focussed on the image of herself, by cleverly delineating the incidents and accidents without destroying the finer qualities of an Indian woman.

Shobha De in a confessional manner has given a true account of her childhood days, adulthood as model, and her career as an editor. She has provided brief and sensitive details of her family, particularly her father. She has narrated number of incidents of her life for example as a youngster, and she was a rebel and always did things against the normal traditional way.

Shobha De has had unhappy and troublesome marriage life. She could survive with the social custom of marriage. Due to her firmness, she could survive her family life. She has refused to bow down as ordinary homemakers against oppression and patriarchal orders.

The spirit of secularism instilled in her writings. She spoke for and stood with strict discipline. She has proved herself as secular in her approach to all the religions of the country. De has maintained her secular character by detaching herself from any favour or bias feelings towards any group or community as a journalist and novelist.

Shobha De's keen surveillance of woman's condition in the post-modern world explores the turbulent territory of women's psyche with identity crisis. She finds that the educated urban woman in India believes change in her concept of life towards family and society. This belief later brings out internal and outer conflicts and moral dilemmas affecting her psychic conditions. She always fights against the cultural barriers, which curb her freedom to enjoy her own life. The urban woman does not want to be a docile spouse to her male partner. When her views are not respected in the name of marriage, she is ready to challenge men without any fear and confusion.

Shobha De depicts modern, educated, career-oriented upper class women who are delicate to eternal changing times and situations. Her women are aware of cultural shortcomings to which they are subjected to in this patriarchal society. They rebel against their men seeking considerable identity and unlimited freedom. They are trapped in a conflict between personal aspirations and social demands. Her women do not accept to be labelled as objects of gratification. They challenge their victimization and find a solace redefining their own morals. Their idea of freedom is borrowed from the west because the urban woman in India today is matched with the woman from the west. They refuse to become a male appendix and want to have a significant role in the society.

SHOBHA DE - FACETS OF FEMINISM

Feminism is a general term covering a wide range of ideologies and theories which pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in society and culture. It has always meant a belief that women should have the same rights, power and opportunity that men have.

Feminism is a movement, a revolutionary voice and a way of life that emerged as a political movement; an important force in the western world in the 1960's and continues to campaign for the equality of sexes and to end the discrimination against women.

Shobha De is a staunch opponent of the customs and norms of the Indian society which place women in a position inferior to that of man- physically, politically, socially and economically. De's novels speak about the women who have decided to refuse to continue with the conventional patterns of sexuality and gender specific roles. Her novels register the reflections of the novelist on the lives of modern women belonging to the higher class, their predicaments and apprehensions. Each one of them tries to gain control

over her environment in her own way. However their endeavors do not bring a sense of total fulfillment to them.

Their obsession with power prevents them from transcending their environment and experiencing the joy of 'total' satisfaction. Infidelity, incest, rape, lies and death prominently mark their world. On a broader canvas, the women characters are found to be suppressed, oppressed and persecuted in various ways at various levels of society.

Shobha De explores the world of urban women, mostly Mumbai groomed women. The Indian society in recent few decades has witnessed gigantic and extreme changes as far as its women are concerned. As an old saying goes, "What men can do, women can do better". Gone are the days when, women handled menial or unchallenging job roles in organizations. With increasing competition and the urge to stay ahead of the rest, most women these days, manage to play the role of the 'man on the job', while balancing the other-wise conventional roles of a wife, mother etc. There are certain things that man can do better than women and vice-versa.

Shobha De belongs to the modern feminist school of thought. As a feminist writer, she concentrates on women's issues with a new approach, quite different from her contemporary novelists. She raises the women characters in her novels to be at par with male character. They have an equal amount of independence in all walks of life. As De says, "I did write with a great deal of empathy towards women, without waving the feminist flag. I feel very strongly about the women's situation." (De Hindustan Times) As a feminist and a working woman, she is aware of the ordeals that a woman has to go through in professional as well as domestic fronts. Her novels are not based on any fantasy world or times; a glimpse of her narratives can be seen in our own family or neighborhood. Using family and friends as her models, she presents the clash between prevailing socio-cultural values and the new generation.

CONCLUSION

Shobha De has explored imaginatively the varied world of women characters in her popular fiction. She emphasizes the quest for meaning of life, identity and unfulfilled emotional life of the characters through her novels. The object of this research work, therefore, is to provide certain clues for a better understanding of women characters in her novels. It is a modest attempt to study De's women characters in the light of their domestic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Being a woman De is more aware of the predicaments of women. She presents the vital reality and makes us aware of the miseries of women and injustices done to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society.

As a result, the women in her novels appear as life like human beings.

However, it is an important assertion that though De's novels such as *Starry Nights*, *Sultry Days*, *Snapshots* etc. are crowded with female characters, the analysis of the novels clearly indicates that her focus is only on the women protagonists, and the other secondary female characters are simply mentioned.

Shobha De is one of the famous feminist writers of the modern era. In her works there is a bold and frank depiction of fair sex and feminine attitude. Her novels can be termed as the 'protest' novels against the male-dominated Indian society where women are denied the freedom of expression and action according to their will and cherish and fulfil their own dreams.

Shobha De burst upon the Indian literary scene with her debutant novel, *Socialite Evenings* in 1988. The commercial success of *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights* ushered in a new dawn in her life as they turned out to be India's first best sellers since independence, apparently establishing Shobha De as a rising star in the literary firmament. Superficially her fiction is markedly different from the novels of other established Indian writers in the literary sense, but deep inside it elucidates the plight and despair of the educated working class women and thereby strikes on the hypocrisy in Indian Society.

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