



Feminist Consciousness in the Select Fictions of Shobha De

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Abstract

This study examines the degree to which Shobha De infuses feminist consciousness into her female characters. Furthermore, it enhances understanding of urban Indian women's psychology, which demands equal rights for women in finding a meaningful place for themselves. In her novels, Shobha De explores the relationship between Indian women and their male counterparts. She has a wonderful gift for engagingly discussing delicate topics related to human relationships. The theme of her writings is standing up for women's rights and raising awareness of women's oppression. In Shobha De's stories, the female protagonists are charming, poised, and self-assured. She explores the feminine mind and diverse heterosexual, homosexual, and sexual practices in her works. The research project in this study, which is based on a qualitative research approach, uses both primary and secondary data. The major sources will be the selected novels of Shobha De, while the secondary sources will primarily draw from other authors' interpretive, analytical, and critical writings. This analysis and interpretation of the research have led to the conclusion that Shobha De's novels portray female protagonists as revolutionary social members. These social members are filled with a new sense of feminist consciousness.

Keywords: Elite, female liberation, feminist consciousness, tertiary role, woman's psychology.

Introduction

Shobha De, a groundbreaking Indian woman writer in English, presents women characters in her novels quite differently compared to other writers. Her works depict the consciousness of female protagonists in a revolutionary way that shows her as a courageous author. The idea of feminist consciousness is to demonstrate how women, both individually and collectively, tried to confront and question their rights, responsibilities, and position in pre-modern society¹. In *The Feminist Consciousness*, Green defines the concept of feminist consciousness as something other than an ideology but rather a system of perceptions of women that are conscious of this system. He continues by arguing that becoming feminist results in a change in consciousness as well as a change in how one perceives and interprets daily life². Shobha De's female protagonists in her fiction seem to have also assimilated these perceptions of feminist consciousness into their characters and actions in their practical lives to challenge the notions of traditional male-dominated societies. Her works explore the interpersonal interaction between Indian women and their male counterparts. Her literary works transmit the idea of rising up for women's rights, which has an outcry of oppression and discrimination against women in a patriarchal culture. She has a remarkable talent for discussing delicate issues relating to interpersonal interactions in a distinctive manner. She has demonstrated a capacity to depict delicate aspects of human existence, social and sexual interactions, as well as the psyche of women with a hint of open-heartedness in her novels³. In Shobha De's stories, the female heroines are manly girls who are appealing, poised,

and confident and who combine the physical independence, sensuality, and tenacity of the flapper with feminist assertiveness and traditional home life. Indian English literature undergoes significant transformations, and the prominent position that Indian English literature currently holds is attributable to a large number of writers. Through their literary expressions, particularly in the novel genre, several women writers have made their presence felt in Indian writing both historically and more recently. Numerous female novelists have interwoven their ongoing experiences, hardships, and sufferings in the home, workplace, and society at large. They are advancing globally, receiving positive reviews, and receiving recognition on a global scale. Their work is no longer regarded as subpar, melodramatic, or disparaging. The literary achievements of Shobha De as a novelist in the contemporary Indian literary scene have established her as a revolutionary fiction writer who is not afraid to express women's innate yearning to be treated equally with men in society. Shobha De's female characters rebel against the forces of patriarchy within the constraints of the same norms and practices she has become accustomed to. The female characters in her works, which are driven to discover their own identities, appear to have therefore found a new home⁴.

Through her writings, Shobha De skillfully explores urban Indian society, exposing all of its fundamental characteristics. She depicts urban elite society as an exclusive, titillating, but ideologically sterile and powerless world enclosed in the frenetic energy that wealth and social unconcern create among India's upper class.

Her stories primarily focus on the female psyche and its challenges, as well as various heterosexual, homosexual, and sexual practices. According to Mckinnon, power is embodied by sexuality and that is socially produced, rather than the reverse way around⁵. De destroys the interpersonal bonds in the characters she portrays in her stories. Her keen eyes perceive the details people generally miss, and her perceptive ears pick up sounds that most people's ears miss. Her females are remarkably open while talking about and engaging in sex. The foundation of the relationships in Shobha De's works is desire, money, and greed. It implies that upper-class people's propensity for more immoral behaviour in romantic relationships may be influenced by their positive attitudes regarding avarice and the pursuit of self-interest. In her works, body chemistry is important. She uses dark hues to depict men in her stories. Since they can't control how things turn out, they are incredibly inert, unresponsive, and unable to do anything. In order to investigate the causes of the psychological changes that enable Indian women to become more modern women through redefining their identity and carving out a niche in their lives, we are tracing the emergence of a new woman. The themes explored by Shobha De in her novels include family, matrimony, masculinity, identity, existence, and marginalization³. So, De's female characters are exactly the kind of people that spit in the face of obstacles and assert their uniqueness by doing things that are radicalizing, scandalous, and unorthodox to their core.

Objective and Rationale of Study: The current study aims to evaluate the feminist consciousness that Shobha De provides in the female characters in her novels and help readers to gain a better understanding of these novels. This study advances knowledge of urban Indian woman psychology, which promotes equal rights with those enjoyed by men, based on the human interactions shown in Shobha De's novels. The social realities addressed in these chosen novels include the difficulties that the average person faces in a society that is becoming more materialistic. This includes the degradation of human values in relationships, lifestyle, and thought. As a result, these values seem harsh, brutish, crude, uncivilized, and the true embodiment of female authors.

The current study will support the feminist cause of women's empowerment, either directly or indirectly. Traditionalists who still think that women should stay at home will become more tolerant of women as a result of this change in mindset. It will force society to think of women as equal to men and cause a huge awakening regarding the situation of women. In this way, readers will be able to view Shobha De's novels in a new light. With the aid of these novels, students will also have the opportunity to conduct research on the lives of Indian women. The study offers insight into the inexplicable disruptions in interpersonal ties that evolving problems in urban India have caused. It involves more than merely bored and displeased housewives; rather, it involves females who hold the most juvenile notions of superiority. Furthermore, cynical and hardened women who are receptive to the age-old feminine

fantasy of a spouse who is capable of handling any responsibility are also prevalent.

Methodology

Examining feminist awareness in seven novels of Shobha De—*Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sisters, Strong Obsession, Sultry Days, Snapshots and Second Thoughts*—is the main objective of this research work. Both primary and secondary data have been employed in this study project, which is based on a qualitative research methodology. The aforementioned Shobha De fictions will serve as the primary sources, while the secondary sources will heavily be drawn from other authors' analytical, interpretive, and critical writings. Because of this, the research's analytical and interpretive approach will be crucial. Concepts like "feminist consciousness," "feminist," "female psychology," and "patriarchy" will be examined with the use of reference materials that are accessible in libraries and online. Following the analysis, the researcher will look into the literature on Shobha De's novels while considering their applicability to their research and the writings of knowledgeable scholars. I'll examine or investigate some scholarly English-language journals from India and other countries. Shobha De's fiction will be examined as part of the study. Additionally, information from both primary and secondary sources will be obtained and examined. I'll use online content from sources like blogs and websites.

Literature Review

The fictions of De are an uprising against social standards that devalue women in society. Her women have created their own norms of behaviour independent of the constraints of conventional society. This very tendency establishes the framing of each character's relationships, difficulties in their personal lives, wants, and relationship breakdowns, as well as their deviant sexual activity and the protagonists' voice of revolt, among many other things. Amarnath Prasad and Kanupriya in *Indian Writing in English: Tradition and Modernity* critically examine the different aspects of Indian writing in English. They contend that while modern writers use modern vocabulary and writing styles, as well as images and symbols, modern writers nevertheless possess a strong sense of tradition and modernity⁶. Indianness is strongly felt in the English writings of Indian authors, such as Shobha De. This has given Indian writing in English a unique and personal identity. The leading female characters in the works of Shobha De represent the aristocratic urban Indian ladies who advocate for female liberation in all walks of life. In this regard, Das Bijay Kumar in his article *Shobha De's Sisters: An Appraisal* comments that Shobha De has succeeded in portraying the story of two upper-class businesswomen in modern India within the parameters of art and fiction with a very interesting theme⁷. In this novel, Shobha De depicts the marital strife of Mikki. She suffered and learned the art of how to live life. In winning the love and admiration of her half-sister (Alisha), she proved her ultimate success.

Two women make an embarrassing mistake, and De transforms their sincerity into love and passion, transcending all social boundaries. Shobha De's use of figurative language in Hinglish lends charm to this novel. In addition to being best-selling, the novel is rich in variation. In discussing Shobha De's female protagonist's desire to be acknowledged as a person such as that of men, Neeraj Kumar in his article *Search for Self and Identity in the Novels of Shobha De* concludes that Shobha De has crossed into deeper human problems because her works address a problem of identity⁸. She values transparency and honesty in the account of events. She disapproves of sexual prejudice and accords women the respect and individuality they are due.

Shobha De's female leads are not overly sentimental. Indian women do not simply strive to live an eternal existence but also reject stereotypical perceptions of Indian women in words and actions. This is regardless of whether they are in business or engaged in sexual affairs. Rashmi Gupta in her article *Freedom from Social Bondage in Shobha De's Sisters and Strange Obsession* observes the nature of the female characters introduced by De. She believes Shobha De's work is more competent and grounded and an amazing addition to the field of popular fiction writing. The work of De is an uprising against social standards that devalue women in society⁹. These women have developed their own codes of behaviour independent of the constraints of conventional society.

Throughout her writings, Shobha De paints a clear picture of the elite society of modern India. More than other writers' work, De's novel vividly captures modern life. In some of her novels, she presents men in a bad light. Genuine recounts of events and open-heartedness are extremely meaningful to her. Jaydipsinh Kisabhai Dodiya's article *Shobha De's Critical Studies* comments that Shobha De acknowledges the exclusion and marginalization of women and makes an effort to disrupt this trend in her writings¹⁰. In the same way, S.P. Swain's article *Socialite Evenings: A Feminist Study* discusses Shobha De's opinion that a woman is both passively bold and powerful. The women in her novels embody the overwhelming materialism and lack of incorporeality of the modern era¹¹. Karuna's marriage is shown as a failure by the novelist because it lacks love, kindness, happiness, and a bridge. They struggle against a violent and male-dominated society. Karuna criticizes her husband's unflattering personality, and deceit. *Socialite Evenings*¹² does not provide a systematic action plan for readers to take social action, although it may, to some extent, solve some social problems for the sex-starved unsociable. Similarly, Sangita Yadav in *The New Woman in Shobha De's Socialite Evenings* mentions that De's women characters are not overly sensitive in their emotions and thoughts; however, they are also powerful and they control the male psyche¹³. They have independent thoughts that help them accomplish their objectives. The economic independence of De's female characters is given more emphasis.

Regarding the revolutionary nature of De's female characters, whose role in challenging marriage ethics is explored by R.S. Pathak in his article *Feminist Concerns in Shobha De's Work: A Study in Attitudes*, in which he argues that Shobha De's women dismantle all notions of respectability connected to marriage in which the unafraid, boisterous, arrogant, egotistical and dishonest female characters of De zealously shatter all sexual taboos¹⁴. De shows men in dark clothing and comparatively feeble and helpless; her fiction typically focuses on the struggles of an urban woman while emphasizing the importance of typical relationships in urban India. But disagreeing with the opinion of Pathak, Shashi Kant Gupta in *Indian Ethos in Shobha De's Work* mentions that De's female characters demonstrate how, despite the ostensibly glamorous lifestyle of permissive high society, the novels ultimately represent traditional Indian values, placing a strong emphasis on the value of a strong family and marital fidelity¹⁵. The author of the work simply disapproves of permissiveness and various forms of sexual conduct. Happy existence and a healthy society are reliant on human ideals, which the novelist projects in her role as a feminist humanist writer. However, in the opinion of Shobha De, women might become independent and self-sufficient through education and financial security for which they have to prove themselves in defiance as well.

Shobha De's works emphasize sexual freedom over marital fidelity¹⁶. This is evident in Subhash Chandra's essay *Family and Marriage in Socialite Evenings*. Anjali serves as an example of the notion that marriage only occurs among the wealthy classes in *Socialite Evenings*¹². In union with Abe (Abbas Tyabjee). The pervert Anjali and the womanizer Abe were both. Abe divorced Anjali after discovering that she was having an extramarital affair. Karuna left her marriage as a result of her need for freedom, space, and self-expression. In order to divorce her husband, she married Krish. It is underrated how significant marriage and family are, and the fundamental premise of marriage is ignored. Marriages that are appropriate and free of societal ties are described in the novel.

Shobha De's blatant disregard for the norms of morality and decency present in the patriarchal social system displays terrifying flippancy. In this regard, Sudhir Kumar his essay *Artist as Vamp: A Feminist Approach to Starry Nights* marks Shobha De as a soft-porn author¹⁷. In *Starry Nights*¹⁸, the horrifying encounter between Aasha Rani and her uncle serves to reveal the facades of the male-centred and male-controlled value system. The female protagonist's opposition to victimhood and oppression is manifested through a variety of enduring ideological systems. Her heroines' way of life is likewise fraught with disappointment, mental breakdowns, and catastrophes. So while this vamp feminism is horrible in terms of aesthetics, it is undoubtedly beneficial economically. Most of the female protagonists of De's novel seem to have given high priority to economic strength as a milestone to fight deeply rooted patriarchy in society.

Emphasizing a person's physical, mental, emotional, and health-related components of life, Beena V. Rathi in her critical essay *Shobha De's Spouse: The Truth about Marriage: A Handbook* contends that *Spouse* is primarily about married life. According to the essayist, De is a traditionalist who supports marriage. She opines that the goal of life is to thoroughly enjoy it rather than make changes¹⁹.

The women in Shobha De's fiction are more practical in day-to-day situations. They separate from their marriage and start dating elsewhere. The female characters in Shobha De's works play primary, secondary, and tertiary roles²⁰. In *Women in Shobha De: A Feminist Perspective* Sarada T. focuses on Shobha De's efforts to increase cultural awareness through individual awareness. The 1995 article *Tender, Beautiful, and Erotic: Lesbianism in Starry Nights* by Prabhat Kumar Pandeya details Asha Rani's experience as a lesbian in the film *Starry Nights*. Linda provided assistance, adoration, and consolation for Asha Rani. Given that she doesn't want to be a lesbian, she isn't identified as one in the novel. In contrast to her physical self, Asha Rani's sexual behaviour and psychology are examined in this essay²¹. Shobha De's *Strong Obsession*²² addresses the obsession of a lesbian character. According to Tikkha Neelam's article *Lesbian Connection in 'Strange Obsession'*, because of her Electra complex, Minx turned out to be a lesbian. She associates with undesirable people as a result of her failure in life. She changes her gender and begins to despise her father²³. It was motivated by anger and concern about male dishonesty.

Since Shobha De has spent years associated with Bombay stardom as a journalist, she has closely observed the urban lifestyles and psychology of the women residing there. Therefore, she has a keen understanding of its portrayal. Geeta Barua in *Rise and Fall of a Star: A Study of Starry Nights* shows the same aspect of the female psyche. Before she became a famous actress, Asha Rani was Viji, the misbegotten child of a movie mogul. She fell in love with married man Akshay Arora, but he betrayed her. Barua's article also included a description of her first lesbian encounter with Linda. Because Abhijit was married and had children, their relationship was just as verbose. She married Jamie Phillips, with whom she shares a daughter named Sasha in New Zealand. She had an adulterous romance with Jojo when she was in India, and he also hated her. In conclusion, it can be said that Asha Rani, a well-known film star, experiences a peak and fall in *Starry Nights*²⁴. She stays in the Bombay film industry forever. She is dependent on the movie industry and continues to work in it, if not as a heroine then at least as a producer.

Results and discussion

Shobha De introduces the theme of the colonization of Indian women at the invitation of their male partners in *Socialite Evenings*. The main character Karuna's wedding is a breakdown because it lacks sex, pleasure, and viaducts. The male and

female have no shared sympathies. She soon establishes a formal relationship with her male friend. Karuna lacks a basic understanding of male-female relationships because she hardly ever addresses her male companion by his first name. The full embodiment of that opinion can be found in this book. Karuna is a very intelligent young woman. If anything, she is also a European. It shows that wealthy, intelligent Indians are not hesitant to touch on anything in Western subjugated society and complex relationships²⁵.

In Shobha De's *Sisters*²⁶, people and their organizations have lost any sense of morality. This is a story of dishonest global civilization. Asisha and Mallika are fictional sisters who have a disturbing connection at the same time. They are two daughters of a powerful moment trader named Hiralal, one of whom is legal and the other is not, who dies at the opening. The mythology is centred solely on Mumbai's corrupt global marketplace of commerce. It is focused on masculinity, betrayal, abhorrence, conspiracy sex, and dishonesty. The evolution of the commercial sphere in the book also shows the different real-world issues that face cosmopolitan women. Sex and gender are both rapidly lagging behind holiness in acknowledging reality. Most women are employed as masculine dolls in this part of the world. Their biggest problems are men's, women's, sex, and wedding ceremony infidelity. It also demonstrates how women experience men's excitement. Additionally, it represents an accurate representation of the perplexed existence and ethical disorder of cosmopolitan women. A significant aspect of Shobha De's book is the metaphors she uses for their female victims, including vultures, sharks, and businesspeople for their dishonesty²⁵. Due to the prominent characters' responses to these issues, the novelist Shobha De successfully depicts major issues like dishonesty, global culture, and civilization. In the end, it represents acceptance of reality rather than deliverance or escape.

Discussion: The film actress Aasha Rani's journey from her small-town childhood to Bombay is chronicled in Shobha De's 1992 novel *Starry Nights*. Rani put a lot of effort into leaving her small-town upbringing. She reacts well to prostitution with well-known actors, producers, directors, heroes, and cameramen in the film industry. She offers no resistance at any point throughout the story. She takes chances to fit in with society. A litany of disasters, the demands of circumstance, and an unhappy marriage have little impact on her. As a phoenix rising from the ashes of the past, she shares a wonderful vision for the future with her daughter. It ends with positive news. Therefore, De's feminism is both more responsible and conscious. She settles the rest of her life not with a tone of frustration and depression, but with a zeal like that of the mythical bird Phoenix. Shobha De calls our attention to the deceptive and challenging business world of multinational industrialists in her next novel *Sisters* (1992). It focuses on the struggle a liberated woman named Nikki has when she must choose between her social self and herself. She decides to safeguard herself from going without. She consciously opted to get married.

Her ex-husband filed for divorce and barred her from having children. She has struggled throughout her life and is currently caught in a web of difficult interpersonal situations. Simple and uncomplicated storytelling makes the story seem more realistic. The condition of Mikki in the novel serves as an illustration of how oppressively regimented ancient society was.

Shobha De's novel *Strange Obsession*²⁷ centres on the lives and incredibly passionate relationship between two young women named Amrita and Meenakshi. She presents lesbian philosophy and behaviour for debate. A lesbian with an obsession named Minx is discussed. She is spoiled by her father's love, warmth, and attention. She became lesbian because of her strong antipathy and fear of dissimulation. Similarly in another novel of Shobha De *Sultry Days*²⁸ published in 1994, Deb is the main character. Nisha is attracted to Deb because he combines extremes. The author of the novel explains the Neo-modern rich's style of living. On the other hand, Nisha identifies Deb's fake commitments and shows her the real ones. So, it is evident that Nisha's dedication to a cause has a positive impact on how she develops as a person.

In *Snapshots*²⁹ (1995) Shobha De describes the lives of six girls attending Santa Maria High School. The novel depicts a metropolitan society where males are on the periphery whereas women struggle under their dominance. The book's power-hungry female characters wave at one another and plot ways to dominate and manage the flaws of their supposed companions. Shobha De in *Second Thoughts*³⁰ (1996) recounts the life of Maya, a young Bengali woman from the middle class. She develops a romantic relationship with a Bengali boy from Bombay who has recently returned from abroad. The insanity of the Indian arranged marriage is exposed in this shocking tale of love and betrayal. The novel's main focus is on the miserable existence of Maya, who is bound to her marriage. She too consents to continue to live in loneliness and isolation. She decides to protect both her marriage and the sultry atmosphere of Bombay. The glitz of her life abruptly and rudely disappears at the stroke of midnight. Shobha De's exploration of novel experiences is surprising.

Through *Socialite Evenings* (1989) Shobha De illustrates that affluent, informed Indians are not in the least bit hesitant to touch just about anywhere within Western enslaved society and sophisticated relationships. Women serve as a metaphor for the dominant materialism and lack of spirituality that define the present day in Shobha's writings. A decline in moral and ethical ideals drives modern Indian women to seek temporary relief in numerous identities. In Shobha's depiction, the woman is not just the main character but also a driving force in society. Karuna's wedding in *Socialite Evenings* is a flop since there is no love, joy, or bridge in it. She despises the callous and distant behaviour of her husbands, who frequently keep themselves occupied with dull, repetitive tasks like reading the business sections of a newspaper. It is natural for women to crave the close company of their spouse so long as they remain physically

close together. This is in order to transmit feelings of love, care, and protection directly or indirectly. De's female characters' consciousness seems to have always given a high priority to this practical aspect of daily conjugal life. In the aforementioned novel, Shobha De portrays female characters as being ones that are well-trained, avant-garde, astute, wealthy and self-absorbed because of their unfastened principles³¹. It also demonstrates the variety of perspectives presented by a recent female. The female characters in this fiction are alive and enjoyable, pleasure seekers as well as self-pity.

Conclusion

Shobha De is a daring Indian female author who reflects diverse thoughts on women's rights and emancipation in contemporary literature. When the opportunity for women to coexist in equality with men is denied, she views women's extramarital affairs as a kind of resistance or protest by them against social norms and moral ideals. Her women are brave in starting adulterous relationships to satiate their innate cravings as a result. They frequently exploit sexual activity to their advantage to advance their social and financial standing. Shobha De values complete openness of heart and a very clear account of occurrences. Her account contains nothing snobbish about Indian heritage or culture. Her morals are more consistent with the real principles underlying Indian traditions and practices. She is criticized by India's orthodox population because of her outspoken views on sexuality. Despite all the criticism she has faced, her literature has gotten positive reviews from not only different European nations but also from all over the world. Her women engage in violent conflict to achieve their overgenerous aspirations in a society dominated by men. Occasionally, women challenge the patriarchal order by asserting themselves. In order to avenge their perpetrators, they challenge social taboos and shape their fortunes by living for themselves. To achieve joy and accomplishment, they leave no stone unturned. A woman's continuous struggle against slavery, subjugation, and exploitation awakens the reader's pathos and causes her to seek new perspectives to cope with life's challenges. She employs feminist themes to reimagine man-woman relationships to live a harmonious life in contemporary Indian society. Furthermore, in Shobha De's stories, the lovers are bold enough to take a chance by swapping bedrooms without even pausing to look each other in the eyes.

This kind of longing extends beyond what is acceptable in terms of feminism on the part of an urban Indian lady. In De's novels, the majority of female characters who can be considered feminists are generally rude and erratic as wives. In addition, they are unpredictable, and this prevents them from having long-lasting relationships. Therefore, Shobha De's female characters demonstrate their feminist consciousness by becoming unpredictable, rebelling against male dominance, becoming aggressive and violent in their actions, not hesitating to have multiple extramarital affairs, breaking marital knots in spousal conflicts, and challenging the patriarchal norms of

society as a whole. All of these actions are the consequences of the strong feminist consciousness that De has cultivated in her female protagonists, who dream of equal status with their male counterparts in every walk of life.

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