



Lesbian Feminism in the Select Novels of Shobhaa De

Dhanalakshmi.R

Research Scholar

V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women

Virudhunagar

dhanasep2@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

The present paper analyzes the lesbian relationship predominant in the cosmopolitan way of life. Shobhaa De portrays the harsh reality of the film industry. Her novels apparently reveal the loveless life of women. Struggle for identity leads the protagonists to self-destruction.

Keywords: Lesbianism, sexploitation, search for identity and yearning for love.

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian feminism is a cultural movement and critical perspective, most influential in the 1970s and early 1980s, that encourages women to direct their energies towards other women rather than men, and often advocates lesbianism as the logical result of feminism. In the words of lesbian feminist Sheila Jeffreys, "Lesbian feminism emerged as a result of two developments:

lesbians within the WLM (Women's Liberation Movement) began to create a new, distinctively feminist lesbian politics, and lesbians in the GLF (Gay Liberation Front) left to join up with their sisters". (17) According to Alison Bechdel Feminism is the theory, Lesbianism is the practice.

Lesbianism is sexual activity or attraction between women. Female homosexuals are often called lesbians.

Women who are attracted to both women and men are called bisexuals. A lesbian is a female homosexual: a female who experiences romantic love or sexual attraction to other females. Female homosexuality has several names: lesbianism, Sapphism, and Tribadism. Tender approach is an important thing in this behavior. The word "lesbian" derives from Lesbos, the third island where the ancient Greek poet Sappho was born; her name is also the origin of its nowadays less common synonym "Sapphic".

Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. The global idea of feminism refers to the belief that men and women deserve equality in opportunities, treatment, respect and social rights. The word "feminism" was coined by a Utopian socialist and French philosopher, Charles Fourier in 1837.

Feminist literature portrays characters and ideas that attempt to change gender norms. It tends to examine, question, and argue for change against established and antiquated gender roles through the written word. Feminist literature strives to alter

inequalities between genders across societal and political arenas. Finally it seeks to add a unique and often overlooked feminine specific voice and tone to gender, societal and political issues, as well as social inequalities where feminine voice is needed to make an impact.

Indian writing in English is a part of the literature of India in the way and the various regional languages attribute to the same tradition as is shared by the regional languages and their literatures. Indian writing in English begins with the colonial encounter. Indian Writing in English is a relatively-recent phenomena, as far as literature goes. Though one can trace such writers in India to a century back, Indian writing in English has come into force only in the last couple of decade or so.

The emergence of women's writing in India during the last quarter of the nineteenth century is of great significance, in the sense that it makes the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian women. Women writers whether post-colonial or not have always been marginalized and excluded from the literary canon. They are treated as "Colonies" in a male-dominated value system. Their work has been undervalued due to patriarchal

assumptions about the superior worth of male experience.

Shobhaa De was born as Shobha Rajadhyaksha to a Sarawat Brahmin family on 7th January 1948, in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. She is an Indian columnist, author and novelist and brought up in Gurgaon, Mumbai, India who started her career as a model. After making her name as a model, she began her career in journalism in 1970, during the course of which she founded and edited three magazines-*Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*. At present, she is a freelance writer and columnist for several newspapers and magazines. Shobhaa De is an author of twelve books. Her works generally starts with the letter 'S'

Shobhaa De has dealt with various themes in her novels such as, love, marriage, sex, feminism, alienation, search for identity, loneliness, decadence of man etc. Infidelity, family disintegration, degeneration of values, and post-modern sensibility are other common themes in her novels.

Shobhaa De's women are different from the ordinary traditional rural women. They belong to city-life and of high status. They have their own way of living their life

free from all kinds of clutches and patriarchal rules prevalent in the rural society. The woman in Shobhaa De's novels is very much calculative about the mundane things and use 'sex' as means to become affluent and popular.

IMAGE OF LESBIANISM

The novel *Strange Obsession* depicts the strange relationship of lesbianism between Amrita Agarwal, a budding model and Meenakshi Iyengar, a lesbian. Amrita, is oppressed by the rule of Minx, a woman and she is oppressed by the sexual exploitation she is subjected to the woman who refashions herself in the novel is Minx who is presented as a materialistic, lusty, and liberated figure. Minx's transformation into a lesbian is due to an Electra complex. Minx is attracted towards her father when she is hardly thirteen years old. She thus becomes a sexual competitor of her own mother. She develops hatred for her father and every man. She becomes a lesbian and forcefully falls on an upcoming model. Amrita does not appreciate this entire intense obsession, but Minx weaves her threatening spell and finally seduces Amrita in her own bedroom.

In the second novel *Starry Nights* Shobhaa De has graphically depicted the

Bombay film world and how Bollywood could not be complete without sex and fleshy pleasures. In man-woman relationship, it is usually the man who has an upper hand. Most women have no guts to voice or react to their partner's feeling of fulfillment in sexual pleasures. But through lesbianism woman gives a vibrant jolt and denounces man as unimportant even on the sexual front. Most of the heroines depend upon their mothers for everything in the movie world.

The protagonist is a journalist and becomes a friend of Aasha Rani. *Starry Nights* is the story of the struggle and survival of a woman in a sex starved society. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. This novel deals with gender discrimination, subordination of women, male-violence and the social taboos. The novelist has portrayed the glamorous world of cinema in which for the sake of money and fame ambitious young girls become the victims of sexual exploitation.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

In *Strange Obsession* Amrita's mother wants her to have a normal arranged marriage to an NRI living in New York. Amrita first refuses and then sees that marriage will be her escape from Minx. A series of problems awaited Amrita from the day following her marriage. Amrita is divided into two: to accept relationship that goes against norms of society and the relationship that makes her safe and secure but cannot fill her womb. Minx, strong in her obsession and desire for Amrita even murders Lola a model-a competitor of Amrita.

In *Starry Nights*, Akshay Arora the prominent figure in cinema develops relation with Aasha Rani but only for fulfilling his sex hunger. One time he says:

Why have you come here? Akshay lurched towards her, 'Bitch! Don't you know your place? I don't like my women spying, you are a spy! Wanted to catch me with someone, didn't you? Get out, get out!' ... Before she would finish her sentence, he had struck her hard across her face. Aasha Rani fell to the floor. Akshay kicked her... Aasha Rani could taste blood as if flowed from her nostrils. (30)

Akshay needs sex and also wants variety, and therefore loses interest in Malini who can't fulfill his demands. Through Malini and others, the novelist seems to suggest that mostly actors in Film industry are unfaithful in their family life and therefore their wives have the stories of sadism, mental and physical cruelty and humiliation to tell. Wives are generally treated as commodities.

Not only in the older days but also in the modern world, women are considered as weaker sex. Even though they are emancipated, they are still subjugated and discriminated in the gender biased society. People think that women can be easily exploited because they are built in such a way. The usual statement is 'she cannot do this, because she is a woman', uttered by everyone in all the ages. They are able to undergo physical torture and psychological trauma meted out by men. Women are being constantly imposed by the sexual desires of men. They are simply seen as 'sex-satisfiers'.

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

In *Strange Obsession* a series of problems awaited Amrita from the day following her marriage. Her husband was found missing from the hotel room from where he had gone for a morning walk.

Obviously it was the hand of Minx that worked behind the episode. Somehow she was able to trace him in Minx's room. Minx had a larger design with her and the newly wed husband and wife were made to remain naked and were given instruction to have sex with each other openly. They had no way other than obliging. Minx did not stop there. She even wanted to burn them to death and kill herself in the process. Somehow Rakesh saved her from the engulfed flames but both Minx and he were admitted to the hospital with serious burn injuries.

Aasha Rani's lesbian experience in *Starry Nights* is not just a variant sexual behavior but it has relevance to the heroine's character. It is her short-lived abandonment in the arms of another woman, Linda, the fleshy warmth giving her emotional security, love and certainly sexual pleasure, as in Dubai with the Thai girls she had experienced some of the greatest orgasms of her life. In the turbulent life of the heroine and her many sexual escapades and many affairs the lesbian affair is something different, something fulfilling, an emotional oasis. Aasha Rani's lesbian affair may not be central to the novel and she cannot be called a lesbian, for she does not show much

preference for it, yet it does have bearing on her character.

Amrita's character exudes a sort of irresistible charm. The way her beauty and boldness is described, makes her seem to be a divine creature. Slowly she undergoes a change when Minx becomes an indelible part of her life and she changes beyond the recognition. Her strength and will power get crushed and she seems to be a meek submissive creature. Later, as time moves on, she regains her self-confidence and strength to fight against all odds and emerges victorious.

Aasha Rani's life goes through great turmoil. So many ups and downs in life transform her into a forgiving woman. Instead of escaping from life's responsibilities, or yielding to the problems, Aasha Rani chooses the right way of struggling and surviving through it. She realizes that her roots are very deep in the soil of India, especially in Madras where she can and will grow.

Shobhaa 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 other contemporary novelists. Although De

exhibits neither the traits of radical feminists nor the liberal feminists, she is more vocal and audacious than the other Indian feminist writers as she strikes on the conventional canons of morality and decency prevalent in the conservative social system. Shobhaa De began to portray the Indian women characters in her works as protagonists, treating women's issues on priority basis and focusing on the cause of Indian woman. Shobhaa De explores the world of urban women, mostly Mumbai groomed women. The Indian society in the last few decades has witnessed gigantic and extreme changes as far as its women are concerned. 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.

Shobhaa De is not the only author to be ridiculed for her frank and candid depiction of human relationships; Khushwant Singh and Sasthi Brata have also been criticized for the same. The use of vulgar and obscene language has been a charge against Mulk Raj Anand's fiction as well. Even in Western literature, several reputed authors like D.H. Lawrence and Philip Roth though patently recognized as

indecent have not been discarded for their literary merit.

CONCLUSION

Finally, though her novels are criticized for pornographic element, De is definitely a writer with a purpose. One cannot ignore her because she is the celebrity writer and has contributed in her own distinct way to Indian Novel in English. In the present scenario of gender discrimination, a study of these novels helps to widen and direct our thoughts to relevant problems affecting women in Indian society.

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