

**WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF DEPENDENCE AND DEPRIVATION IN  
SHOBHA DÉ'S *SISTERS***

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“Women are the only oppressed group in our society that lives in intimate association with their oppressors.”

-Evelyn Cunningham

**Abstract**

In spite of the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, the daughters in a family are entitled to equal inheritance rights along with other male siblings, property rights to women in India are denied on the grounds like the continuing male bias and other social and cultural barriers. Indian patriarchal system forces women to give up their share of their parents' property to their brothers for various reasons, such as the fear of breaking familial bonds. After marriage, the Indian husbands have the control over the economic affairs in the family. The economically deprived women are highly vulnerable and become easy victims. This paper analyses, Shobha Dé's depiction of the economically deprived Alisha in her novel *Sisters*.

**Key words:** Shobha Dé', Sister, Victim, Dependence and Deprivation.

In Indian society, women have been regarded as the reserved source of labour and their economical activity is either exploited or unrecognised. Indian patriarchal system keeps women to look after house holding activities and child rearing. Women's rights to property in India are limited compared to men. In India, women's right on the ownership of family property is governed by succession laws based on religion, unless there is no will. Hindu law prior to 1937 did not permit a woman not to own any property, except receiving from her parents at the time of her wedding.

The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, actually didn't give daughters equal rights to ancestral property. This disparity was eliminated by an amendment made in 2005 that ensures women equal rights in the inheritance of ancestral property, which was reserved exclusively for male heirs earlier. The daughters in a family become the coparceners at par with sons, such that they receive an equal birthright to a share in the natal family's ancestral property, i.e., parents' property. Coparcener refers to the equal inheritance right of a person in a property. Yet, there are several formal barriers like the continuing male bias and other social and cultural barriers are also continued to exist. Women are generally compelled to give up their share of their parents' property to their brothers for various reasons, such as the fear of breaking familial bonds.

The denial and violations of women's property rights widens the economic disparity between men and women. Women's property rights are affected by complex web of statutory laws, personal laws, social norms and customs.

Despite the equality guaranteed by the law of the land, women in India had suffered a lot of inequalities. Dependence of men and deprivation becomes the major causes for the victimization of women in India. Most Indian women have no independent assets or regular income that makes their counter partners for economic abuse. Wikipedia defines economic abuse as "a form of abuse when one intimate partner has control over the other partner's access to economic resources<sup>1</sup> which diminishes the victim's capacity to support him/herself and forces him/her to depend on the perpetrator financially." In most Indian families the husbands have the control over the economic affairs in the family and the wives are sentimentally confined within the home to cater the needs of the family members in the form of cooking and looking after other house holding activities. So she needs to depend on the male counterpart for all her supply of money. The husband holding the purse strings gives the wife only what she needs for running the home or even lesser. Hardly a husband gives pin money to his wife, to spend as she pleases. If at all she needs to buy something exclusively for herself, she has to look to her husband, which is known as economic deprivation.

Economic deprivation is different from economic abuse, where the husband has the control over the economic resources of his wife that forces the victim to be a financial dependent on the perpetrator. This economic abuse often becomes a controlling mechanism in subjugating women. The other kinds of deprivations like orphan and no one for guidance and are therefore vulnerable or when an individual is caught in the clutches of someone and is therefore vulnerable. The condition is still worse when girls in their adolescence suffer economic deprivation and cannot get their needs. Such girls become easy prey to temptations. Very often they form unhealthy friendship with the affluent and, in their desire to maintain their self-dignity, are easily tempted to adopt easy ways of making money. Such women and girls are highly vulnerable and become easy victims.

In Dé's novel *Sisters*, Seth Hiralal's daughter Alisha, by his mistress Leelaben, is by birth vulnerable. She acutely feels deprived that her father and the other family members never acknowledge her as Hiralal's legal daughter. There is no mention of her in the stories that the

newspapers carry of her father's death in an air crash. Hiralal's other daughter Mallika, or Mikki, has been in the US for five years. Hiralal promised Alisha to send the US, but unfortunately, he died in an air crash. Alisha was even not allowed to attend the funeral of her Papa.

Ramankaka helps Mikki to face the first meeting of the Board of Directors in her father's company Hiralal Industries with some confidence and élan. When the meeting is over, Ramankaka informs Mikki that her father's Hiralal Industries is in deep financial trouble, adding that Hiralal setup a trust, whereby Alisha has all her father's money, to be inherited when she turns twenty. He cautions Mikki that Hiralal Industries may have to liquidate a few assets to raise the badly needed money.

Mikki's aunt Anjanaben has designs on the Hiralal fortune. The premature death of Hiralal and Maltiben offers her a long-awaited opportunity. She has always forced herself on Hiralal's family, particularly taking care of bringing her only son Shanay and Mikki together. Even at a young age Mikki disliked her and so did her mother Maltiben. Shanay is mostly in abroad, engaged in all sorts of business ventures. Immediately after the death of Mikki's parents, Anjanaben tries to gatecrash into the parentless Hiralal bungalow, but Mikki keeps her out with determination.

Anjanaben started to lectures her husband Himanshubhai on the ways to capitalize the death of Mikki's parents and to take over the control of her affairs and fortune by using their son Shanay as bait to make Mikki in a vulnerable predicament. Anjanaben virtually pushes her son Shanay on to the Hiralal territory for selfish reasons:

'Are you mad?' She'd screamed at him long-distance, 'Think of the future. This is just the opportunity you need. You can easily rise in the company. Mikki is just a foolish young girl. She has no idea of business.' ... One in the family is enough.' . . . Anjanaben's eyes shone at the thought of the future and the untold promises it held for all of them. Mikki wasn't exactly her idea of the ideal daughter-in-law . . . on the other hand, if the girl was willing to listen and learn, why not? It could work. (SI 52-53)

Mikki attempts to salvage Hiralal Industries by inducting a team of young MBAs from renowned business schools. Shanay reports Mikki that everyone in the office knows of her sister Alisha, which did not greatly disturb Mikki. But she is certainly jolted when he reports the rumour that Hiralal's air crash was not an accident, but a case of sabotage, stage-managed by his business rivals in the context of loans and bad debts. He insinuates that Ramankaka knows much about it but may not cooperate. His suspicion falls particularly on Chotlani, a half-Punjabi business rival who has often fronted for the Khinlanis. With such reports, Shanay renders Mikki highly vulnerable.

Ramanbhai calls on Leelaben and Alisha and tells on the girl of the fortune awaiting her, the precarious condition of Hiralal Industries, the near penniless condition of Mikki, and Alisha's own fair chance of gaining control of Hiralal Industries. He offers to run the business if she is ready. Alisha's response is cool: "It's too much to absorb in such a short time, I need to think about what you have just told us. I shall speak to my mother and then consult a lawyer before getting back to you" (SI 79). Alisha jumps for joy and dances round her mother after Ramanbhai leaves the flat. This development leaves Mikki extremely susceptible. She realised that her father's most trusted lieutenant is plans to betray her and join forces with his business as well as personal rivals.

One day a stranger of around forty years befriends her at a restaurant and introduces himself as Binny Malhotra. He is interested in her and her affairs. She is fascinated by him. Devouring his bait, she goes to his mansion. He warns her that Hiralal Industries is in big trouble. He offers to rescue her and Hiralal Industries upon two conditions: she must marry him and she must relinquish complete right in all her father's affairs to him. Mikki walks out on him stating that neither she nor Hiralal Industries is up for sale to the highest bidder. Having thereby won the enmity of a ruthless manipulator Mikki becomes more vulnerable than earlier.

After her formal engagement to Navin, Mikki goes out driving alone in the small hours of the night. A car pursues hers and she is forced to the curb. Two men hold her up but reassure her that she will not be harmed. They reveal that Shanay owes them six lakh rupees and that, unless she pays up in a weak, she will be dead. The next day she consults Ramanbhai. She wants to fire Shanay. But Ramanbhai cautions against a hasty decision. Later Shanay meets her in person. He cannot explain his conduct satisfactorily. However, Mikki opts to forgive him and give him another chance. She also decides to curtail Shanay's powers and responsibilities.

On learning Mikki's engagement to Navin, Binny sets his henchmen on the Hiralal trail, to find out all about its affairs. They report that Hiralal Industries is in a mess and it is the right time to move. Ramanbhai has already surreptitiously contacted Binny's men. Binny is rich and powerful, but does not have acceptability in society. His is a rags-to-riches story and he is suspected of shady deals and fraudulent foreign exchange transactions. His primary motive in desiring to marry Mikki is to gain respectability. So, when Mikki gets engaged to Navin, she earns the enmity of Binny.

Shanay is suspected for the important missing files from the office of Hiralal Industries. But Shanay himself reports, with evidence, his suspicious that Ramanbhai is siphoning off the company's revenues quietly. Shanay also proves that Hiralal Industries is sinking. Mikki wants to seek Navin's help. Despite Shanay's reservations, Mikki speaks to Navin, only to find out that he is, after all, mamma's boy. She calls off her engagement to Navin.

After Mikki's engagement is called off, her friend Amy advises her to marry Binny, because he is the man who can salvage Hiralal Industries. So, when Binny sends for her, Mikki takes her to his island home and after making passionate love, she decides to marry Binny. Shanay is devastated. Ramanbhai too remonstrates. But she brushes their objections aside. She discovers that her household is in disarray because of Sakharan, the security chief that leads to the dismissal of Sakharan.

On the day Mikki is to meet his family, Binny converts his home into a mela and arranges a night-long orgy of drinking and eating, Mikki sees him enjoying the company of Urmi, whom Amy describes as a "bitch" and "lethal". By 7 a.m., Mikki is tired and wants to go home. A completely soaked Binny takes umbrage at this and throws a glass cup at her and laughs uproariously. Then, calling out the name of Urmi, he summons his car, gets in and drives away. Mikki seriously considers calling the wedding off. But Binny sends a jewelled watch and a "Forgive me" note in contrition. Mikki, recalling that she has signed away everything to Binny, is miserable and decides to contact Alisha. But Alisha is merciless. She resents that she failed narrowly to acquire control of Hiralal Industries because of Binny. She wishes Mikki ill.

On exactly the day Mikki is to be married, the morning papers shock the city with a planted story alleging that Hiralal and his wife died, not in an accident, but of sabotage. It appears that the motive is to prevent her from becoming Mrs. Binny Malhotra. But Binny takes it coolly and advises Mikki to concentrate on looking beautiful. The miserable Mikki tries to contact Shanay but learns that he left the town on the previous night. As the wedding ceremony

is going on, Mikki hears a long wail coming from amongst the guests and sees Urmi being escorted out of the madcap with a young girl by her side that made Mikki to feel irritated, but Binny remains cool and collected. Once the wedding ceremony is over, Binny whisks Mikki away to his island hideout and made passionate love. Binny makes it clear to Mikki that her job now onwards is to take care of him.

Alisha makes friendship with Navin and, encouraged by Sapna, her assistant, goes out on dates with him. She takes him home drunk and, in the morning, makes randy love to him. Her only motive is to make Navin forget Mikki. When her mother was recovering in the clinic of Dr. Kurien, Alisha was drawn to Dr. Kurien and her activities were completely changed. But on learning that he lives with his parents, his wife and two children, she flees his presence and asks her driver to drive to Navin's house.

Mikki becomes so vulnerable and dependent that, when Binny loses his temper on the eve of his departure for London, she behaves like a typical whore to mollify him. He accepts all the pleasure she offers him, calling her a "whore" repeatedly, but his mind is far away on someone else.

Just to learn to cook better and please Binny better, Mikki enrolls in a cooking course while he is abroad. There she makes friendship with a Goan named Lucio who, after some time, confides to her that he is gay. Ramankaka phones and warns her that her life is in danger from Binny by hinting that Binny was behind her parents' death. Returning from his foreign trip, Binny is furious upon seeing Mikki and Lucio in the kitchen. He beats them up and throws them out, telling Mikki that divorce is her only option. He claims that he has reports and photographs against her. Lucio takes her to his house, where his mother, who is a trained nurse, ministers to her. Shanay is summoned to Lucio's house. Amy gets an activist-lawyer named Bhawna to join the group. They discuss their future course of action. But the very next day Binny's lawyers serve a divorce notice on her. Bhawna advises Mikki to return to her father's house and occupy it before Binny locks her out.

Alisha's affair with Dr. Kurien renders her very vulnerable. She seems to turn into Christianity. Mikki fears that Alisha is losing her senses. She reminds Alisha that he has already told her that he is married and will never leave his wife. Alisha cries like a vulnerable child and Mikki rocks her to sleep, crooning a song that she remembered from her childhood. Alisha is soothed, because she shared the song in her childhood.

Mikki's loses her health as well as her weight and looks pale and sick. Amy persuades her to check into Breach Candy Hospital for a battery of tests. The physician diagnoses Mikki's condition as "nervous exhaustion." He advises complete rest, iron-rich diet and a complete change of atmosphere and climate. Alisha starts going to church regularly to pray for Mikki. Mikki is afraid if she is affected by cancer. Dr. Kurien is eager to check personally, but does not want to offend Mikki. After three weeks of rest Mikki feels better. Yet, they seem much worried.

By following Mikki, Alisha discovers Mikki's participating in some weird rituals with a cabal. Mikki takes Alisha to Dr. Kurien's nursing home and informs that Dr. Kurien is He says that Alisha is possessed. Mikki accuses him of having caused troubles. He explains that he broke up with Alisha after he nearly lost his child because of meningitis. Dr. Kurien felt that he has paid a heavy price for his lust. Mikki suspected that Alisha was on drugs and accused Dr. Kurien for it. But he refuted the charge saying that Alisha is out of his life. Then Alisha was admitted in an intensive therapy programme. Alisha naturally becomes a victim of her dependability.

Mikki started to jog in the morning regularly. She received a phone call from a woman who said that she had evidence of her father's killer. Decided to meet her and informed the same to Ramankaka, who suspected Shanay, but agreed to go with her.

After a while Mikki spots a car, from which a man gets out and blocks her path. She recognized his voice. He pushed her into the back seat and tied her hands behind her back and her feet too. She recognized him from recollecting her past. She distinctly remembered the man standing in the foyer of the home, with Papa shouting angrily at him and the watchmen beating him up. He pushed her into a dingy room in what looks like an outhouse and came in after her. He said: "Don't worry . . . I'm not going to rape you. That was your father's specialty. And he paid with his life for it. No, I'm not a rapist. But I will not spare you either. You will suffer-like he made my woman suffer. You will die-like she died" (SI 335).

Mikki learnt that he had been her father's gurkha and after twenty minutes Ramankaka arrived. He revealed that he killed her parents through the gurkha because of her father's arrogance. He used the gurkha to kill her husband, who frustrated his plans to take over Hiralal Industries. He disclosed that her kidnapper is Bahadur Singh, whose beautiful wife was raped by her father. He planned to kill Bahadur Singh after using him to kill her. It is followed by a scuffle in which Mikki fainted. When Mikki regains consciousness she found herself in a hospital, where a nurse informed her that Alisha had been with her for three days, refusing to go home ever since she brought her there, refusing food and sleep. Alisha unveiled that it was Shanay who saved her life. Shanay came to her bedside and Alisha stepped away, leaving Mikki and Shanay together. When Mikki is brought home after two weeks, Alisha informed her that she has TB, as Dr. Shirodkar has discovered. But it is not as bad as they suspected, that finally made Mikki to feel a sigh of relief.

It is clear from the character Mikki that dependence and deprivation render individuals, especially children and women vulnerable. The proverbial desire of the moth for the flame is applicable to all individuals. When a child acutely feels deprived, it will go to any length to gratify its longing. So is it with women too. Particularly with Indian women, whose degree of dependence and deprivation is extraordinarily high. When rendered vulnerable by dependence and deprivation, the child, girl or woman is defenseless against the tentacles of temptation and easily falls prey to the blandishments of acquaintances, friend and even strangers.

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