

SHOBHAA DE'S SISTERS: A STUDY OF MODERN LIBERATED URBAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Shobhaa De is one of the most reputed novelists of the contemporary times. She marked the beginning of a new trend with a single emphasis on feminist concerns and hope of a new world order. With her women centred approach she seeks to project and interpret experience from the viewpoint of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Through her literature we saw an upsurge of a new awareness about the women's marginalized position resulting into the advocacy of woman's right, status and power at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes'. Her novels are concentrated on women's problems and she expresses herself freely and boldly on a variety of themes from a feminine eye. Feminism, alienation, identity crisis or an individual struggling to be oneself are some of the major thematic concerns of her novels.

'Sisters' by Shobhaa De is known for its apparently close picture of flashy Bombay life. It is the novel dealing with the psychic conflict of a liberated woman protagonist who is caught between a personal self and societal self. The main concern of the novelist in Sisters is to demonstrate the frantic efforts made by Mikky, a modern educated socialite young woman, to win some space in the society that is otherwise hostile and inhospitable towards women. The present paper aims at considering the traumatic experiences of a woman caught up in the whirlpool of complex human situations. These women search for personal freedom, denied which, they turn rebellious.

Keywords: Feminine sensibility, alienation, identity crisis, liberated women

"In India we treat women strangely. We either worship them or we burn them. If that sounds like an extreme sentence so is our peculiar attitude. If images of Durga were found in some of the houses where daughter-in-law were sent up in

flames for not having brought along a handsome dowry. Such contradictions co-exist so naturally that they go unnoticed. Especially by men.”

(Shooting from the Hip 110)

The above lines quoted from Shobhaa De's non-fiction *Shooting from the Hip* blatantly describes the position of Indian women and the injustice meted out to them. Through her works De strives to expose the traditional value system and the social structure with a view to showing its futility and urgency to redefine it. Her fictional world dive deep into the analysis of the sufferings and persecutions caused to women in this patriarchal society. As a modern novelist, Shobhaa De tries to turn the pattern prevailing in society upside down and give new dimensions to Indian literary scene. Her novels owe their incomparable popularity to her intimate understanding of the psyche of women and their problems. Through her novels and essays, she has tried to shatter the patriarchal domination in the Indian society fed on well-known injunctions of Manusmriti:

**Pita rakshati kaumarye, bhrata rakshati yauvane
Rakshanti sthavire putrah, na stri svatantryam arhati**

(Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males of their families... Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and when she becomes old she is protected by her sons. A woman does not deserve freedom.) Her work is a revolt against society and social norms laid down to underestimate woman. Her novels are largely peopled with women and the life spectacle and world-view presented in her novels is directly or indirectly related to women. In her novels we come across a variety of women from extremely modern, assertive, young and liberated traditional Indian housewives. She does not believe in describing her women characters as mere helpmates at home. Thus we find the women protagonists in her novels are more powerful than male characters.

The central theme of De's novels is woman and her relation with the family and society; her tireless efforts to make an identity in a hypocritical and callous society. Her woman characters are sensitive and sensible human beings of urban world. The presentation of modern, rich, educated and assertive women in De's fiction marks a difference from traditional women's problems. These women are conscious of their self-respect because they are competent professionals working shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. She has depicted women as epitomes of power, liberty and beauty in her books and discusses blatantly the problems, desires and aspirations of career women highlighting in general gender awareness, self-definition, existence and destiny. Her writings have always provoked reaction because of their realistic in depth portrayal of life and her capacity to expose society but it is a fact that she comes before us as a balanced evaluator of a woman's existential dilemma because she exhorts them to fight for their rights, to be economically secure and simultaneously to be aware of her social responsibilities without neglecting, in anyway, her familial duties.

Shobhaa De has emerged as a noticeable champion of the women's cause as in all her works she has tried to highlight the raw deal, which women get from the male dominated society. Through her works De makes her intentions crystal clear that her women are not going to be emotional, subdued and weak ladies of manner. They are to be assertive, pragmatic and strong. Her novel 'Sisters' is a story of corrupt urban culture where human relationship has lost its all values. At the same time, it is a tale about emotional bond between two sisters, Mallika and Alisha who are liberated working women brimming with confidence. They are the daughters, one legitimate and the other illegitimate, of big time business man Hiralal who dies at the

beginning. The story is full of sex, betrayal, hatred, intrigue and corruption. The narrative opens with the protagonist Mikki (Mallika) Hira Lal who has to face the trauma of her parents' untimely death in air crash. Society considers that tender feelings are attributed to female species, which limits her to come out from any shocking news but in spite of being loaded with worry or grief, Mikki does not lose her patience and courage. Boldly she prevents her maidservant to weep. "Gangubai, please stop that... what has happened has happened." (Sisters 2) Mikki had courageously faced the intimate loss of her parents' sudden demise which validates the fact that an independent personality of a woman cannot be marred because of her feminine traits. Mikki, the young educated and modern girl takes over the responsibility of handling the affairs of Hiralal Industries. She asserts her independence and expresses great confidence in her own way, "Mallika Hiralal was all set to make her way in the corporate world as the undisputed queen of a cluster of companies her father had built from scratch" (18). Mikki not only begins to plough her way through the business world difficulties but also takes over the new subject position deconstructing the traditional patriarchal identity of a woman and the ideas that mark gender difference expressed in the words of Ramankaka:

You don't have time on your hands for apprenticeship. Had you been a son your father might have taken you into his confidence from a young age and guided you properly from the beginning. But as a daughter, all he wanted for you was a good husband—that is all. Your training if there was one was to become an obedient daughter-in-law in some prominent business family. (30).

But Mikki's words exhibit her newly acquired western culture and a typical feminist outlook:

Thank you for your advice Ramankaka. I appreciate and value your words. But I'd like you to hear a few of mine now. I can't change my sex, unfortunately. That is the one thing all of you will have to accept. But I can change just about everything else... and I intend to... I don't expect you or others to give up your prejudices but I want you to know that I will not let that stand in my way (30).

Mikki being poised, strong and mature girl takes charge of her business and begins to show her managerial skill. Surrounded mostly by males in her business empire, Mikki stands tall though aloof and not dependent and yet successful. Her father's 'Hiralal Industries' are on the verge to collapse and Mikki is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt. She has the single vision of saving her vast empire and in order to actualize her vision she was ready to undergo any trials and tribulations. Thus Mikki is projected as a strong individualistic, self-reliant woman ready to face the challenges imposed on her by the male-dominated society.

Apart from being just a professional woman, Mikki's second main task is to win the heart of her step-sister Alisha from her father's kept, Leelaben. After she came to know about the existence of Alisha, she felt morally strengthened. Mikki's compassionate nature prompts her to establish relationship with Alisha, help her and make her partner in the business, but she finds Alisha to be rude, unfriendly, jealous and full of hatred towards her. It is difficult for Mikki to handle both of these tasks due to her inexperience. Alisha is outraged by the column that the Seth was "Survived by his only child, a daughter, Mallika, studying in the US". Alisha appears as an angry young woman. The main problem of her character is her conflict about her identity. She questions, "and what about me? What am I? A puppy? A kitten? She regards Mikki as her enemy number one. For Alisha, wealth is more valuable than relation but for Mikki, relations are more important than money. Alisha addresses Mallika with abusive words like "fucking charity" and "bitch". The contrast between these two sisters makes this novel worth reading.

In her effort to save her industries, Mikki came into contact with a number of young as well as not so young persons. Many young men, Navin, her friend, Shanay, her distant relative (Anjanaben's son) and industrialist, Binny Malhotra were interested in her. After rejecting Shanay, Mikki got engaged to Navin. Binny made all tricks possible to win over her. The unhealthy financial condition of Hiralal Industries and incompatible behaviour of Navin during the time of crisis compel Mikki to take the drastic step of breaking her engagement with Navin. Binny took advantage of the situation and lured away Mikki by giving costly presents and promising financial help. Binny being an elderly person and a past master in the art of lovemaking lured Mikki on his bed and forced her to marry him.

Despite of all the warning Mikki got from her well-wishers not to take hasty decision of marrying Binny Malhotra, she marries him. It is indeed surprising to note that unlike Shobha De's other women-heroes who generally tend to free themselves from the clutches of married life, Mikki deliberately gets into wedlock. Though she is enamoured of the life of freedom, she is not averse to being a wife.

In De's feminist understanding of life, marriage has a worthwhile place and can certainly play a positive role. De does not seem to reject the institution of marriage as such. Her only concern is that marriage should provide mutual love, equal status, happiness and a stable companionship. She is critical of a marriage that provides the husband unlimited power over his wife and keeps wife to a secondary position. In Sisters men like Binny dictate their own terms to their wife:

You are Binny Malhotra's wife. And you'd better start behaving like her. In our family women are trained to obey their husbands. Thank your stars you don't have a mother-in-law to please. You will never, I repeat, never, question me... or complain. You have nothing to complain about—got that? Your life is perfect... Where I go, what I do, when and with whom, is my business. I will spend as much time with you as I choose to. There are social duties and obligations which you will fulfil. (116).

This traditional role of an all-powerful, authoritative and possessive husband remains operative in modern marriages also. Mikky, a wealthy, educated and assertive young girl submits before the patriarchy ordained power of her husband whom she loves very much. On the other hand the double standard morality makes the situation ironical. Binny expects Mikky to stay at home and try to mould her behaviour according to his desires. But he himself is a cunning and cruel person. He is already married and has conspired to marry Mikky to snatch her wealth. Being a representative of the oppressive system, Binny does not like Mikki's desire to be an active partner both in life and business. He is characteristically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife 'who stays at home and looks after me... our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run, they fulfil their husband's every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going.' (109). The process of dehumanization of Mikki begins, when all her property is transferred to Binny.

Shobha De's fiction brings out the complexity and power of the patriarchal hold that develops a certain mind set. The patriarchal way of life with its long history and immense power has constantly hammered certain ideas in the minds of men and women. In De's novels, the traditional women, who have suffered much due to the oppressive and dominating attitude of men, do not think of open defiance. Mikki suffers with extreme mental pain finds it difficult to live without men. She says, "But I need a man around. I don't mean sexually. I feel lonely and distracted" (155) Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. Although she fails to find in Binny a man with whom she could share her life, Mikki is "willing

to compromise her own life if it meant he'd notice her, listen to her, and acknowledge her existence." (140). Her dream to enjoy the fruit of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. She pleads innocence and tells him, "Binny... I love you. Only you... I can't live without you." (141)

Mikki was altogether shattered by the pangs of an unsuccessful marriage and the mistreatment of her husband who goes in for a divorce. All her efforts to live with him fails. She comes back to her parent's place and seeks the help of Alisha. On the other hand, Alisha leads a flirtatious life with men whom Mikki rejected. She develops intimacy and sexual relations with Navin as a way of having revenge against Mikki. After Navin's teasing remarks about Alisha being less sexy than her sister Mikky, Alisha tries to kill herself. Her life is saved by Mikki, who gives her blood during her critical situation in hospital. This incident brings them closer and they unite with each other. Another man Dr. Kurien, comes into Alisha's life with whom she had intensely desired to have intimate relations. Thus we find Alisha's passion for sex continues till the end of the novel. Mikki is determined to regain her industries with which she identifies herself. By a sudden turn of fate Mikky regains control of Hiralal Industries after the death of her husband Binny and his illegitimate family. She inherits all of her husband's property too. Ramanbhai wants to kill her but Shanay rescues her. The novel ends with an epilogue. Both the sisters decide to depart to London. It is not a departure, but a salvation or an escape from the evils of corrupt business world. The last scene is a warning by Alisha to the bachelors who pays no attention to her and Mikki. Both Alisha and Mikki establish themselves as liberated, bold and sexually frank ladies of urban culture throughout novel.

Shobhaa De pictured the world of urban class where men and women represent tremendous change in the concept of marriage and constancy in love. This freedom of sexual passion and uncontrolled lust is destroying the culture and tradition of India. The idea of Indian marriage as a holy union of man and woman is altogether shattered by modern liberated men and women. Through Sisters De has presented women who break all the age-old moral codes of the male dominated world. Through her women characters she mirrored liberated working women who are rebellious, wealthy, packed with confidence and affirmed for their position in society. De has presented the harsh realities of the patriarchal society along with it she presented today's women who are being aware of their positions and rising from their eternal slumber.

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