



Resilient Identity: Upeaval of Women in Shobha De's Fiction

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Abstract

The narratives of Shobha De, underline her role as one of the recognized feminist writers to delve into the lives of modern Indian women. She is known for her contemporary and often provocative storytelling that addresses the evolving roles and aspirations of women in India's urban landscape. Through her characters, she explores themes related to women's agency, economic independence, and their ability to challenge traditional patriarchal structures. The present article discusses Shobha De's representation of women as economically independent and successful in her writings. In De's fictional world, financially self-sufficient women are not portrayed as an unattainable ideal but as a reality. Her women lead lives on their own terms and prioritize their mental well-being. They have careers that provide them with enough financial stability to support themselves without relying on male support. Her female characters challenge societal norms that traditionally placed them under male dominance, and they strive to establish their individual identities. These women are not content with being recognized solely as someone's wife; instead, they aspire to have their own place and work tirelessly to achieve it, even in the face of obstacles. They fearlessly confront challenges to realize their goals and have come to understand and exercise their right to equality with men. They view human connections as opportunities for personal and professional advancement, using them as stepping stones to wealth and status. The article underscores the significance of monetary freedom as a powerful tool in women's struggle against patriarchy in Shobha De's narratives.

Keywords: Economic, challenge, independence, identities, career

Introduction

Economic independence indeed plays a crucial role in empowering women and challenging patriarchal norms. It is an important factor and most influential instrument for women in their continuous conflict against patriarchy and moving towards self-realization. A woman has to build a strong economic base for herself to get her own room without depending on the man. The purpose for being so strong and vocal for the economic independence of woman is that for centuries her dependence on man has brought her to a pathetic condition. It is clear that economic freedom would refer to a situation where every individual have access to the full range of economic prospects and resources, including employment, services and adequate disposable income so that they can outline their lives and meet the needs of their own and their loved ones.

In her epoch-making book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir pierces the thin veil of the prevailing social order and instills in women a spirit of rebellion and grit to reject male hegemony (Beauvoir). The critic stresses on the equal share of women in power. She pleads women to create their own symbolic order, saying that women can only free themselves by "*thinking, taking action, working, creating on same terms as men*" (727). The feminist thinkers have given abundant importance to monetary freedom as it acts as a powerful weapon to empower women. Shobha De, one of the recognized Indian Women Writers, deliberates each and every aspect of human relationships. In her works, she attempts to denote human relations through the lenses of gender, peculiar desires, and void.

After all, some men are more emotional than others, some women have more power and success

than others, some men perform their fair share—or more—of housework and child care, and some women find sex with males to be both joyful and empowering. Indeed, contemporary gender relations are complex and changing in various directions, and as such, we need to be wary of simplistic, if handy, slogans that seem to sum up the essence of relations between women and men. (Zinn)

Shobha De has not only emphasised the gender construction in society as a writer, but she has also highlighted the challenges of her feminine protagonists to break free from such structures. She is known for her deep understanding of the female psyche. Her work marks the creation of an innovative and emerging awareness among women regarding their prestige and deals with their anxiety about redefining themselves. It questions the marginalization of women in a male-dominated society and inspires women to break out of their shackles and seek positive qualities such as strength, competence, confidence and assertiveness, the qualities that are considered exclusive to men (Srinivasa Iyengar and Nandakumar). The new identity gave women a magnificent armour of self-confidence and advanced their ability to analyse and test with a wider perspective. Shobha De points to the fact that such new women cannot be successful unless they are financially independent. She has relevantly put forward the economic aspect of the power struggle. Ultimately, she says, "*everything boils down to money – that great level of measure. There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit is meaningless so long as*

the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else" (Dé, *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings*).

The women in her narratives are deliberated very modern and classy, westernized and, above all, characterless. Her protagonists exhibit this peculiarity in their charismas. Her women face severe objections from conservative bourgeois families for choosing fascinating and challenging careers such as modelling, acting, directing, journalism, designing, advertising and even big business. In India, for the middle-class conservative, such kind of arrogant lifestyle is highly undesirable and not in accordance with female conduct and lifestyle. But they persevere and face these challenges boldly and move ahead on their challenging career path. The novelist realistically portrays diverse types of women protagonists in her novel who are not only a strong character but also make bold decisions to persist in society.

Modelling is the first challenging career chosen by Shobha De for her female characters. Her debut novel *Socialite Evenings*, (Dé, *Socialite Evenings*) narrates the journey of Karuna, a prominent Mumbai socialite, from a clumsy middle-class girl to a self-dependent woman. She hails from a conventional middle-class family background and enters Mumbai's high society circle after her bureaucrat father was stationed in the glitzy city. She gives up her middle class values and moral standards and clasps the high life of the wealthy upper class. She goes on her way even after her parents' strong protests. The modelling career that she chose despite her father's objections is her first step to enter the world of glamour. Her meeting with Anjali, a prominent socialite and wife of an affluent playboy, facilitates her entry into high profile society. Amrita, in strange obsession, is another challenged woman who belongs to an educated and elite family. She decides to find her future in modelling and hence moves alone from Delhi to more profession-oriented Mumbai to chase a modelling career. To fulfil her old wish, she settled in Mumbai. Like any other modern Shobha De women, she is ambitious, conscientious and aware of her strengths. She doesn't hesitate to cash in on her blessings and believes in bringing the world down if possible. She challenges to live alone in a city like Mumbai, far from home, to pursue a modelling career. In an alien city, Mumbai, she holds her business very well, lands some surprisingly lucrative modelling assignments, and surprises established models with her triumphant performance. She is prepared to overcome any hindrances in adapting to the hectic city life. She is as much assured of herself that when she finds herself in the company of sassy lesbians, she doesn't regret her decision or think about returning back to her family.

The next challenging profession that the women of Shobha De have chosen is journalism. Nisha is a journalist in the novel entitled *In Sultry Days*. Although she is a member of upper-class society, she leads a very ordinary life, in which she tries to make her mark through hard work and application (Dé, *Sultry Days*). Though she is a member herself, she has always lived on the fringes of a rich and glitzy life. Thus it can be said that she is completely different from the rest of women characters who revel in a life of glamour and sex. Being a journalist, Nisha begins to discover her commitments, commitment to a cause. She exposes a prominent politician, Yashwantbhai, through her writings and remains unmoved despite God's warning that she will have nothing to do with Yashwantbhai and his underworld connections. Her mother and her activist friend Pratimaben are also involved in her campaign. Nisha's mother and Pratimaben began to expound Yashwantbhai on the issue of torture of Pramila, with whom Yashwantbhai

had been in an illicit relationship for some time. Thus, Nisha acts as a brave, committed and proactive journalist and exposes politician Yashwantbhai.

One more challenging profession area is the business run by De's women. When a woman states she wants to start her own business instead of working for someone else, the tendency of the people is to either laugh or dissuade her. The terms like investing, saving, producing, cost efficiency, growing returns, net output, and income tax all have various male interpretations. Do women not have the same entrepreneurial spirit as men? Isn't it true that a housewife saves from the household budget? Isn't it an investment when a housewife puts her money in a bank or stocks? Isn't it true that a lady visits the bazaar, bargains for one kilograms of potatoes, and prepares various dishes from the same in numerous ways for many times a week, isn't it a value for money? Simone Naval Tata, managing director of Lakme Limited and the managing director of Bharat Radiators are women. Shobhana Bhartiya, descendant of the Birla family, is the managing director of The Hindustan Times. Former model, turned interior decorator, Zarin Khan co-owns a sizable interior design business with a female partner. Asha Parekh, a famous actress, oversees hospital operations in a Bombay suburb. In India, many women own and operate small businesses ranging from food processing plants to tailoring shops, both in the rural and urban areas. Some of them joined forces to create their own cooperatives. However, it is believed that a woman's lexicon lacks the word "business" altogether. The women of De live in a very different way. When they feel that they are being oppressed by males, they have the strength of character to resist, challenge, and respond in kind.

Mallika Hiralal and Alisha Hiralal, the two half-sisters shown in the novel entitled *Sisters*, are portrayed as fiercely competitive, stubborn women who enter the world of high level businesses. They are engaged in fierce business rivalry and are neck-deep in competition. They develop strong independence and assertiveness. They are hard-working young women attempting to continue their famous industrialist father's legacy. For these women, the pursuit of perfection drives every aspect of existence. They are driven to be the greatest in everything. Both of these females continue to pursue their single-minded goal of leading a life of luxury, money, comfort, and pleasure as the plot of the novel progresses, which is quite dissimilar to those women who seek a blissful joy in material possessions. Alisha initially opposes Mikki in every situation. It's impressive how Mikki managed her father's vast economic empire following his passing. Being a business tycoon is a difficult task for a young, frail woman like her, but she takes on the challenge and succeeds. As Shobha De has stated in her own words: "*Mallika Hiralal was all set to make her own way into the corporate world as the undisputed queen of a cluster of companies her father had built from scratch*" (Dé, *Sisters*). When Mallika Hiralal assumes control of Hiralal Industries after her father's passing, she makes her positions extremely apparent. She takes over her deceased father's intricate firm and starts to make her way through the economic world. Raman Kaka, her father's close friend, proposes his help in her business saying,

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. My advice is – leave these serious matters to me. I am there to handle them.

Trust me. I will guard your interests like a father.
But you will make things difficult for yourself if
you do things without consulting me. (Dé, *Sisters*)

She aims to run the business on her own terms. She doesn't need anyone's guidance, not even Raman Kaka, a close confidant of her father who now offers his assistance in managing her firm. At this she says,

Thank you for your advice, Raman Kaka, 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 the others to give up your prejudices – but I want you to know that I will not let that stand in my way. (Dé, *Sisters*)

It's evident that the women in the narrative have been portrayed as strong, ambitious, and independent individuals who are actively involved in the business world. They challenge societal norms that might suggest that business is an alien concept for women, and they prove that they can compete and succeed in the corporate environment. These women are depicted as determined and willing to confront and can overcome any obstacles in their pursuit of success. The text highlights the contrast between these women, who seek material wealth and success in the corporate world, and others who find fulfilment in domestic duties and spiritual pursuits. Thus Shobha reflects a diverse range of aspirations and roles for women in contemporary society.

In *Snapshots*, Aparna is another successful business woman. She is a "corporate woman, an Indian corporate woman. A business woman" (Dé, *Snapshots*), who can protect herself in times of necessity. Aparna is a successful owner of an Advertising Agency. Her progression can be recognised in the words of Prem, when she informs him at Goa beach that they don't have own that property, he responds with a smile, "At the rate at which you're going Aparna, you soon might. Your ambition, man, that's something else. I like it. I like it. But it's kind of scary" (Dé, *Snapshots*). Aparna has a Maruti 1000 and Shed, an advertising agency founded a year ago by two partners, is a small but savvy business. Swati's image in *Snapshots* exemplifies the new woman's self-assurance in discovering her own possibilities. Swati, who lives in London, isn't afraid to play nasty English roles as long as she gets paid. She joins parties with wealthy gentlemen and high officials of the kingdom. Swati recalls a news story widely covered by the international media and the London tabloids about an Indian woman, Pamela Borders, who had actually made money through her sexual relationships with powerful British politicians and other powerful figures in London society. She made her place as a top influential woman. Rashmi, another character of this novel, is also living a free life due to economic considerations. She is also an actress and has an affair with a great film director but she neither pressures him for giving her a role in his film nor does she ask for her recommendation to another director. Being a self-dependent, she begins to live her life through self-struggle and various difficulties.

In the novel entitled *Sultry Days*, Pramila's portrayal is another representative of the challenging professional woman. She is from Nagpur and possess everything a traditional woman could ask for - "A husband with a 'solid' job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own, and all the time in the world to pursue her interests" (Dé, *Sultry*

Days). As Pramila has been portrayed as a new woman by the novelist so she felt indifferent, suffocated and hopeless in such a conventional environment. As soon as she realizes her talent of writing, it brought thoughts to her mind and inspired her to step ahead on the path for developing herself as an independent woman. She started writing poems and within a year she felt that Nagpur was not the right place to recognise her talent. Thus suddenly she moved to Bombay without intimating anyone. There her verses were translated into English and she emerges as a successful woman. But in this glamorous realm, she moves ahead where she overreacts and misunderstands Yashwantbhai, resulting in a traumatic experience that threatens her life and forces her to go in hiding. However, at a later stage, she audaciously exposed him.

Conclusion

Shobha De is known for her skill to portray distinctive characters and their unique traits in order to underline that gender issues cannot be generalized. Through her women characters, she proves that even within feminist groups, individual women encounter with their own set of challenges. Her fictions highlight the diversity of issues and experiences faced by women. It can be seen in characters like Karuna, Maya, Asha, Alisha, and Mallika, each of whom represents different aspects of gender-related challenges. It is seeming that Shobha De's women characters defy traditional gender roles and societal expectations. They have been depicted as fiercely career-oriented, seeking independence, and actively involved in controlling financial matters. Unlike traditional women who often depend on men for economic and moral support, De's women characters have been depicted as financially independent and empowered. They pursue high-profile careers and work towards establishing themselves in positions of power and authority. Their portrayal aligns with the changing roles and aspirations of women in contemporary society, where they are no longer confined to traditional roles but instead seek economic and personal independence. Shobha De's fiction emphasizes the significant societal changes that have occurred, leading to shifts in traditional gender roles and the empowerment of women, particularly in economic independence. Her writing is said to reflect these changes, portraying women as more than just homemakers but as active participants in various aspects of life, challenging traditional norms. Additionally, the mention of wall-posters in public streets suggests that these images of new, independent women are prevalent in the broader cultural consciousness, reflecting changing societal norms and values. Overall, Shobha De's representation of economically independent women serves as a reflection of changing societal dynamics and women's increasing agency and empowerment.

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