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Exploration of love, sex, sexuality, infidelity and power-dynamics in the novels of Shobha De

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Abstract

Novels of Shobha De are an important contribution to contemporary Indian literature. She is known for writing about contemporary Indian society and its various taboos. Her novels often explore themes of love, sex, and sexuality in a frank and explicit manner, challenging traditional Indian values and norms. This has garnered both praise and criticism from readers and critics alike. The works have been criticised by some for their explicit sexual content and portrayal of women as sexual objects. The praise has been for the frank and honest depiction of the lives of the urban elite in India and the exploration of the taboo topics such as sex, infidelity, and power dynamics. The sexual mania of the commercialised world has been explored explicitly. Her characters are often depicted as being obsessed with sex, power, and money, and their pursuit of these desires often leads to destructive consequences. Conservatives in India may criticise her for her open discussion on sexual matters, but her fiction has got tremendous response from all over the world including several European countries. She is best known for her depiction of socialites and sex in her works of fiction, for which she has been referred to as the "Jackie Collins of India."

Keywords: Infidelity, exploration, taboo, domination, sexuality, power-dynamics, mania

Introduction

Shobha De, a modern Indian novelist and columnist, famous for portraying the sexual mania of the commercial world in a very frank and straight forward way, shot into literary limelight by writing her first novel, *Socialite Evenings* which is Lawrentian in expression. She believes that a man's personality can be judged in a true perspective only when one goes into the interior more than his exterior behaviour. Sex, 'the root of all our energy' plays a pivotal role in the fictional world of Shobha De. Most of her novels analyse the various aspects of sex, a great urge of human beings. Her novels challenge traditional Indian values and attitudes towards sex and relationships. They often deal with contemporary social issues such as gender, sexuality, class, and identity. Her works reflect her belief that sexuality is a natural and important aspect of human experience that should not be suppressed or hidden.

The writer is gifted with an extra-ordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. The way she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really insightful. Stories of Shobha De are real stories, still happening in real life. Human relations based on gender distinctions, masculine domination, women's predicament relating to tradition and modernity are all important issues. And Shobha De, through ordinary stories, brings out the reality of the world around us. Many of Shobha De's novels explore the lives of urban, middle-class Indian women who are navigating the complex and often conflicting expectations placed upon them by their families, communities, and societies at large. These women often struggle to assert their own desires and identities in the face of restrictive societal norms and patriarchal attitudes. De's novels depict female sex, sexuality, desire, sexual relationships outside of marriage, extra-marital affairs, the subjects that are considered a taboo and are not typically discussed openly in Indian society. She portrays these relationships as complex and multifaceted, with characters experiencing a range of emotions such as passion, guilt, shame, and desire. Her works often explore the complexities of human relationships, including intimate relationships and sexual experiences. Her writing style is bold and unapologetic. Her works have sparked debates and discussions on various issues, including the portrayal of women in Indian society, sexual liberation, and the impact of globalisation on traditional values.

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Shobhaa De is an author of twelve books. Her works generally start with the letter 'S' like *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sultry Days*, *Snapshots*, *Second Thoughts*, *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings*, *Surviving Men*, *Selective Memory*, *Small Betrayals*, *Speed post*, *Spouse*, *Super India* etc. She is also renowned as a freelance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines. All her heroines, be it Karuna, Aparna, Mikki, Alisha or Asha Rani are rebellious modern Indian women who challenge the orthodoxy of social taboos. They are different from the sexually ignorant Indian woman which is quite contradictory to most Indian male writers who feel that sex is as unpleasant subjection to man's desire- necessary in order to have offspring. Shobha De's women challenge this traditional set up of society. Her women are far more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison to men. They are not submissive, and guilty of their affairs. Sujata, in *Sultry Days* is a prostitute, who does what her mind says. This gives her pleasure. Life is defined on her own terms. In *Starry Nights*, when Asha Rani, the famous heroine of Bollywood, decides to quit films all of a sudden when she is at the peak of her career just to live with a fellow co-star, Akshay Arora, her mother tries to dissuade her from doing it. Then she argues this way, "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up being your money machine. I've done enough for everybody- you, Sudha and others- now I want to live for myself. (106) Asha Rani designs herself a code of conduct for herself which is free from the prescribed gender roles and sexual constraints. *Starry Nights* explores the theme of sex and desire through the perspective of the protagonist, Asha Rani. The novel portrays her as a strong, independent woman who uses her sexuality as a means of gaining power in a male-dominated industry. This shows clearly that women in Shobha De's novels can't be always taken for granted that they will be dutiful and self-sacrificing daughter to their parents.

Women in upper class society have no concern about public. Shobha De takes a plunge extra into the hearts of the liberated upper-class women in contemporary Indian society. Sex and sensuality are a part of life and in order to accept life, one has to affirm sensuality. A woman doesn't consider faithfulness and love a virtue while seeking pleasure. Shobha De depicts women in their true colours. They are portrayed as what they actually are and not what they should have been. Therefore, real pleasure is defined differently for different people. It may mean erotic sex for some women while it may be soft touch and sensual love making as described between Mikki and her husband Binny Malhotra on the moonlit night in his place before their marriage. The heroines in De's novels rebuild their lost fortunes; make all efforts to look glamorous by losing weight and spending money in massage parlours. They try to look and act differently from the conventional and traditional women. They love to fall in love with their looks by which they try to attract people. It gives them immense pleasure when people fall head to heels in love with them and they are least concerned about it. Shobha De doesn't believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere help-mates at home. Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers who have been termed as "New Woman." These so-called new women are much more physically active and athletically strong than their mothers.

The new concept of pleasure envisages complete sexual freedom which is accompanied by economic freedom. Uncontrolled passion is sought by Shobha De's women in the form of pleasure. Social rules have always been harsh on women in India. It is justified that a man as an independent being can have extra marital affairs. The society doesn't raise eye-brows to those men who leave their wife at home and enjoy with either prostitutes or whores by paying them in cash or kind. No one bothers to think about the woman who is lonely in her home waiting for her husband who doesn't come nights after nights. What she would do in such situation? She can't take her life or ruin herself by crying. A woman is socially not complete without the existence of man in her life and she is debarred to enjoy any sexual liaison with any man other than her husband. Her desire for sexual relationship is subordinated to the interest of the society not on her individual feeling. Rigorous taboos of our society forbid women to have any sort of sexual liaisons by breaking the rigid laws of matrimony in India. However, women in Shobha De's novels are broad minded enough to continue with their flings and affairs without bothering about the matrimonial alliance of their partners. These women are confident and are reasonable enough to justify their relationship. The heroines are not ready to obey the superficial social rules which are made by men. Shobha De's women dare to move around and seek pleasure with anyone they like to overcome their mental fatigue. The general norm stated by the society for a woman is to show herself as an active participant in sexual alliance. She is taught not to exhibit her sexual appetite and to participate boldly in sensual activities. Under this servile position, she does not have to express her sexual urge which is considered to be against the social taboos. Shobha De's women frame their own culture by breaking these social norms of the society. This relationship is best exhibited in the relationship between Asha Rani and Akshay Arora in *Starry Nights*. De's novel *Starry Nights* explores the sexual awakening of a young woman who becomes involved in a steamy affair with a married man. Besides this, the novel follows the lives of a group of rich and famous celebrities in Mumbai, and their sexual escapades are a major focus of the narrative. The characters engage in extra-marital affairs, group sex, and other taboo behaviours, all while pursuing their own selfish interests.

One of De's most controversial novel *Sultry Days*, explores the relationship between a young Indian woman and an older British man. The novel's frank depiction of sexual desire and inter-racial relationships challenged traditional Indian norms and sparked a debate on the role of sexuality in Indian literature. In *Sultry Days*, De explores the sexual exploits of a group of young professionals in Mumbai. The characters are depicted as being consumed by their desire for sex and pleasure, and their pursuit of these desires often leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and regret. *Socialite Evenings* explores the sexual life of a group of wealthy socialites in Mumbai, exposing their affairs, extra-marital relationships, and sexual desires. In *Strange Obsession*, Shobha De delves deep into the complexities of sexual relationships and the psychological impact they have on individuals. The novel explores the obsessive love affair between a young woman and an older married man and the destructive consequences that follow. Sexuality is an important theme in the novel *Sisters*, as the four sisters each have their own experiences and perspectives on the subject.

The eldest sisters, Bubbles is a former model who has had numerous sexual partners and is unapologetic about her sexuality. The second sister, Sam is a lesbian who struggles to come to terms with her sexuality and the social stigma attached to it in India. The third sister, Monika, is a married woman who is unsatisfied with her sex life and begins an affair with a younger man. The youngest sister, Pia, is a virgin who is hesitant about exploring her own sexuality.

Ankita Shukla wrote for *The Times of India*, in 2016, that "unignorable has been Shobhaa De's unabashed description of the womenfolk in her novels. De's women range from traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated women. De's novels take a leaf of the urban life and represent realistically an intimate side of urban woman's life, also revealing her plight in the present-day society." In 1992, Mark Fineman of the *Los Angeles Times* described her as "India's hottest-selling English-language novelist," and how her second novel, *Starry Nights* (1991) ^[2], had "a drawing of a nude woman on the front cover," and according to De, "they said it was the first time they'd broken through the 'F' barrier, the first time they'd run the F-word without asterisks." Urme Khan writes for *The Guardian* in 2007, "Her books are steeped in a lifetime's observation of Bollywood," and "They describe a side of the country that western audiences rarely encounter, her central themes being power, greed, lust and sex."

De's writing is often criticized for its explicit sexual content, which some view as vulgar and inappropriate. Some critics have accused her of promoting immorality and undermining traditional Indian values. However, De has defended her work, arguing that she is simply reflecting the reality of modern Indian society and the changing attitudes about sex and sexuality. Through her writings, she has inspired many women to embrace their sexuality and assert their own desires, challenging traditional patriarchal attitudes and contributing to the ongoing social and cultural evolution of India. Despite facing criticism from some conservative quarters, De's novels have been praised for their honest and nuanced portrayal of sexuality and their willingness to address taboo topics that are often ignored in Indian literature. Her influence has helped to open up important conversations about sexuality and gender in Indian society, and her influence on contemporary Indian literature continues to be felt today.

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