International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2025; 7(1): 735-738
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 11-01-2025
Accepted: 15-01-2025

Khirod Borah
Ph.D. Research Scholar. Department of English Arunachal University of Studies, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Dr. Prasenjit Datta Roy
Research Associate Professor, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Khirod Borah
Ph.D. Research Scholar. Department of English Arunachal University of Studies, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Aasha Rani's Re-Identification in Starry Nights by Shobha De

Khirod Borah and Prasenjit Datta Roy

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i1k.482

Abstract
This paper examines the fluid and contested identity of Aasha Rani, the dark-skinned South Indian protagonist of Shobha De's Starry Nights, through feminist, gender-theory, and postcolonial lenses. We argue that Aasha's successive reinventions reflect both her resistance to and entanglement with the patriarchal power structures of Bollywood. Exploited from childhood by her family and industry gatekeepers, Aasha actively negotiates new personal, social, and sexual identities – from abandoned girl (Viji) to celebrity (Aasha Rani) to wife and diaspora mother – by "performing" gender roles strategically Using Butler's concept of gender performativity, hooks's notion of self-defining agency, and Spivak's subaltern framework, we show how Aasha asserts autonomy amid male domination and how her identity oscillates between victimhood and empowerment. The analysis reveals that Starry Nights portrays Aasha as a survivor who, despite abiding by the "rules" of patriarchal Bollywood, ultimately subverts them to claim subjectivity and resist objectification.

Keywords: Reidentification, liberation, exploitation, transformation

Introduction
Shobha De's 1991 novel Starry Nights exposes the dark side of the Bombay film industry (Bollywood) through the life story of Aasha Rani, an ambitious young actress. Aasha (born Viji) is introduced as a "dark, chubby girl from Madras" who enters Bollywood after being prostituted by her mother and then taken as a mistress by a once-famous producer. The narrative follows her rise to stardom, affairs with powerful men, and eventual self-reinvention abroad. De's portrayal of Aasha highlights rampant sexism: women in Starry Nights are often "treated like commodities," useful only for their bodies. Yet Aasha is repeatedly described as more "powerful and bold" than her male counterparts (psychologyandeducation.net). This paradox – a woman both exploited and assertive – raises questions about identity under patriarchy. This paper explores how Aasha redefines herself across contexts of exploitation and power. We focus on her identity (self-image and agency), social identity (role in industry and society), and sexual identity (relationships and desires), and argue that her transformations illustrate feminist and postcolonial themes. Aasha's journey is one of re-identification: she repeatedly remakes herself (e.g., Viji → Aasha Rani) to survive and resist male control in Bollywood. Critical scholarship notes that De's women "defy the set norms of society" and seek "sexual satisfaction outside of marriage as a sense of liberation" In examining Aasha through Judith Butler's, bell hooks's, and Gayatri Spivak's frameworks, we show how her identity emerges from an interplay of agency and constraint – reflecting both personal rebellion and structural oppression.

Theoretical Frameworks
To understand Aasha's identity shifts, we draw on three interlinked theoretical lenses:
Feminist Theory: We adopt a feminist perspective on patriarchy and agency. Bell hooks emphasizes that patriarchy and other forms of domination are maintained by social norms that condition women to rely on external validation. As hooks observes, "if any female feels she need anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining." This idea of self-definition is central: Aasha's struggle involves learning to define herself beyond men's approval. Feminist critics also note that Starry Nights depicts women rejecting traditional roles – they are "assertive, dominating

and bold" rather than psychologyandeducation.net. We will consider how Aasha's actions both conform to and subvert patriarchal expectations.

Early Identity Formation and Exploitation

Aasha's identity transformation begins in childhood under extreme exploitation. Born Viji Iyengar in Madras, she is driven by her mother, Amma, into sex work at an early age. Her early experiences – being forced into pornography and sold to producers – establish her first identities as property and commodity. Shobha De emphasizes that women like Aasha are "forced to fulfill the sensual needs of producers" in exchange for favors. This commodification is vividly conveyed in Kishenbhai's treatment of her: he "considers her as his property" and expects her body to open doors for film roles. Such passages underscore how Aasha's social identity is initially imposed by men: she is "enslaved" and used as an asset. This exploitation illustrates Patricia Hill Collins's idea that marginalized women's bodies become sites of dominant culture's control – an idea echoed by feminist critics of Bollywood today.

Importantly, Aasha's name change from Viji to Aasha Rani (literally "Queen of Hope") symbolizes a forced re-identification. Kishenbhai renames her to craft a new star persona for publicity. Her new name does not emerge from her voice, but from male authority. Aasha must accept this invented persona if she wants a career, which highlights the tension between imposed identity and selfhood.

Despite this, Aasha's identity is not entirely passive. Even as a teenager, she is shown to be calculating and defiant. The critical literature notes that from early on, Aasha is "fully aware" of the power dynamics she faces. When Kishenbhai "raises a finger on her character," she retorts sharply: "All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you all–beat you at your own game". In this line, Aasha refuses submissive victimhood; she acknowledges her situation ("you are all the same," toying with exploitation) and vows to outsmart her oppressors. This moment marks the beginning of her identity as an agent, albeit one using the same tools (sex, cunning) men use. It aligns with Butler's idea that identities can be re-signified: by declaring she will beat men at their own game, Aasha rejects the fixed role of victim. She is still "playing the game," but on her terms.

Thus, from the outset, Aasha's identity is bifurcated: socially imposed (as sex object "Aasha Rani") yet personally enacted (as clever survivor Viji). She embodies hooks's insight that "the private is political": her rebellion by age fifteen is a direct protest against Bollywood's patriarchal order. Early exploitation has thus set up her ongoing identity crisis: she is at once an ambitious "new woman" and a wounded child, straddling defiance and survival.

Social Identity and Power Structures in Bollywood

Once launched in Bombay, Aasha's social identity is tied to Bollywood's ruthless patriarchy. The industry is depicted as a closed world where only the "well-known" and connected thrive. Scholar Vijayata Dhand notes that De's protagonists often achieve goals by "seducing males and [using] every opportunity to reach the top", and Aasha is no exception. She moves through various social roles – starlet, muse to producers, girlfriend to stars – always under male oversight. Patriarchy structures her path: Kishenbhai finances her debut, actor Akshay Arora legitimizes her status (albeit privately), and later gangster Sheth Amirchand protects her career. Each gatekeeper represents a power structure in Bollywood (Production, stardom, underworld) that Aasha must navigate.

Critical studies emphasize that De's Starry Nights unveils Bollywood's hypocrisy. As Songire and Gaikwad summarize, the novel "reveals the truth of Indian Bollywood where women are treated like commodities". Aasha's body becomes a commodity to open doors: Kishenbhai demands she share his bed with acquaintances; later, her involvement with Sheth Amirchand is as much career insurance as romance to the film industry's institutional gaze. Aasha's rising fame is predicated on compliance with male desires, and when she steps out of line – e.g., by refusing Kishenbhai's advances – she is reminded of her expendability.

Yet Aasha's social identity is not entirely submissive. The literature stresses that Shobha De's women "break all set norms in the society" and are "independent" in their pursuits. Aasha exemplifies this: she openly has affairs with married men (Akshay, Abhijit), flaunts relationships, and even engages a young married industrialist. She forms alliances on her terms. For instance, after Akshay abandons her and blackballs her by outing her past, Aasha aligns with Shethji to restart her career. This alliance is transgressive: she crosses class lines and partners with an underworld figure. Socially, Aasha recalibrates her identity – from starlet (an actress objectified) to gangster's moll (an outlaw figure). In each phase, she claims a degree of autonomy. By accepting Shethji, Aasha becomes a player in the power structure, not just its victim.

This renegotiation also reflects intersectional identity issues. Aasha originates from a South Indian (Tamil Brahmin) background, joining the predominantly North Indian/Hindi Bollywood elite. Though the novel does not emphasize colorism explicitly, her "dark" complexion sets her apart in an industry favoring fair heroines (the text notes "dark, chubby girl". Her outsider status may partly explain why she must fight harder and rely on sexual bargaining. Postcolonially, Aasha's shift from Madras to Mumbai mirrors the journey of many internal migrants seeking fame, highlighting regional and cultural hierarchies within India. Once in Bombay, she must assimilate into Bollywood's culture, abandoning aspects of her original identity (even her name) to fit the glamorous image (an act of cultural "re-presentation"). This assimilation and later disillusionment connect to postcolonial themes of seeking identity in a formerly colonized society where local and global cultural expectations collide.

Indeed, Aasha's marriage and expatriation to New Zealand mark another identity shift: she becomes part of the Indian diaspora. This move frees her from immediate Bollywood pressures, allowing a temporary redefinition as a Western wife. However, even abroad, patriarchal norms intrude (e.g., the assumption she will retire after marriage). Hooks reminds us that "once you marry within a society that remains patriarchal, no matter how alternative you want to be… there is still a culture outside you that will impose many, many values on you". Aasha's New Zealand life illustrates this: living with Jay Phillips initially promises escape, but when he cheats on her and Bollywood's threats reach her in London, we see that the patriarchal gaze follows. Socially, Aasha can never fully shed the identity of

"Bollywood star" or "other" – she ultimately returns to Bombay under threat. The industry and its power structures remain the gravitational center of her social identity until the end.

Sexual Identity and Agency

Aasha's sexual identity is a key battleground where personal agency and patriarchal expectations collide. De's narrative treats sex and sensuality as intrinsic to life, and Aasha's sexual experiences are diverse, explicit, and central. She has affairs with multiple men (Kishenbhai, Akshay, Amirchand, Abhijit, Jojo, Gopalakrishnan) as well as with a woman (Linda, a gossip columnist). This sexual fluidity is portrayed less as confounding than as part of her quest for power and self-definition. A critical view is that Aasha equates sexual freedom with liberation: she seeks satisfaction outside the "shackles of marriage," implicitly rebelling against hypocrisy that allows men promiscuity but forbids women the same Scholars note that many of De's heroines (and Aasha in particular) "seek sexual activity outside of marriage as a sense of liberation"

From a gender-theory perspective, Aasha's sexuality can be read as performative. Butler's framework suggests that by performing different sexual roles, Aasha continually rescripts her gender identity. For much of the novel, she embodies a hyper-feminine persona (seductive, glamorous) to fit Bollywood's mold. But by the end, she performs alternative roles: lesbian lover (with Linda) and later lesbian ally (in Shonali's socialite circle in London). These acts destabilize the presumed heterosexual norm, underscoring Butler's point that deviation from heterosexual "gender cores" is policed (as Akshay does by publicly labeling her a porn actress to ruin her) Aasha's choice to engage in a lesbian relationship is depicted as a form of revolt: the affair with Linda "is a kind of revolt against patriarchy and its rigid norms where women are treated like slaves". Thus, her sexuality is not fixed; it is another realm where she enacts power.

Nevertheless, Aasha's sexual agency is ambivalent. On one hand, she uses sex as a strategy ("Her strategy to win over men is her ability to seduce" She consciously trades intimacy for influence. On the other hand, these acts often subject her to more violence and stigma (beatings, threats, slander). This duality echoes Simone de Beauvoir's notion that sexual liberation can be a double-edged sword in a patriarchal society: while offering autonomy, it can also reinforce objectification. Aasha herself initially seems to internalize the idea that sex equals power. Songire and Gaikwad note that Aasha "seduces males and wants to empower herself". This reflects bell hooks's idea of sexual empowerment – yet hooks also warns that women's liberation cannot rely solely on being sexual objects for men. Some critics (e.g., the Indian Book Critics review) argue that Shobha De portrays sex as the only solution, which they find problematic. We interpret, however, that Aasha's extensive sexual agency illustrates both her reclaiming of desire (challenging conservative norms) and the limitations of such power in patriarchy.

In sum, Aasha's sexual identity is a site of struggle. Through it, she negotiates control over her body, at times gaining leverage, but it also lays bare how patriarchal society constrains women's sexuality. Her trajectory – from coerced child prostitute to bossy seductress to queer-leaning consort – shows a complex negotiation rather than a simple emancipation. Still, she embodies hooks's ideal that females can achieve "self-actualization and success without dominating one another", because Aasha's eventual empowerment does not rely on hurting other women (she empathizes with and helps her sister Sudha). Her sexual openness, then, represents an attempt to define herself on her terms – to choose her partners and desires – rather than as a passive recipient of male scripts.

Performing Resistance and Re-Identification

Throughout Starry Nights, Aasha's identity is neither fixed nor purely victimized; she persistently re-identifies herself in response to changing circumstances. After initial stages as Kishenbhai's ward and Akshay's lover, Aasha consciously reshapes her role: she cuts ties, seeks new alliances, and even contemplates suicide when her schemes fail. Each reinvention can be read through Butler's notion that identity is "open-ended" and subject to resignification. By deciding to marry (and later leave) Akshay, to run to New Zealand, and to train her daughter in Bollywood, Aasha continuously redefines what Aasha Rani means. Butler would describe "woman" as "a term in process, a becoming, a constructing" rather than a fixed category – a view mirrored in Aasha's life.

Crucially, Aasha survives not by passively enduring, but by actively playing by the rules and then bending them. Songire and Gaikwad note that Aasha "manipulates many men" and "resorts to the strategy" of beating them at their own game. This pattern of mimicry highlights performativity: by imitating the tactics of male patriarchs (using sex, charm, and boldness), Aasha upends their game from within. For example, when Akshay boasts of betraying her to the press, she later confronts him and demands marriage, attempting to use his cultural frame (marriage) against him. Even her suicide attempt can be seen as a dramatic act of refusal against a world that has denied her love or recognition. In this sense, every stage of Aasha's life is an act of both compliance and rebellion.

From a feminist standpoint, Aasha's re-identification underscores her growing consciousness. Initially, she may have sought only fame and money, but as the novel progresses, she increasingly asserts her need for dignity and selfhood. Srinivas emphasizes that beyond material success, Aasha "wants dignity and subjectivity in her quest." This language of subjectivity is key: it means being an agent with a voice, not merely an object. By the end, when her father bequeaths a studio to her and plans for her daughter, Aasha is part of shaping the future (she is no longer silent). Despite her tragic wounds (her sister is burned, she is threatened by assassins), Aasha's survival into a position of passing the torch suggests that she has reclaimed some agency in defining her and her daughter's identity.

Conclusion

In Starry Nights, Aasha Rani's identity is not a singular, static essence but an ongoing process of survival-driven reinvention. From oppressed film-aspirant Viji to glamorous actress Aasha Rani, from obedient girlfriend to strategic gangster-lover, from lonely expatriate to mother of the next generation, Aasha continually reshapes who she is. This paper has argued that these transformations must be understood in light of feminist, gender, and postcolonial theories. The patriarchal, exploitative context of Bollywood forces her to adopt multiple guises, yet she resists by

reclaiming agency whenever possible. As feminist critics note, De's women often "defy the set norms of society" – Aasha is no exception. Through Butler's lens, we see her identity as a "becoming" rather than a fixed category. Through hooks's insight, we appreciate her struggle for self-definition; through Spivak, we acknowledge the subaltern context that must be navigated. Ultimately, Aasha Rani stands as both victim and rebel – a figure whose very name suggests optimism ("hope queen") even amid struggle. Her "quest for identity" is emblematic of contemporary Indian women's fight to rewrite their stories in a patriarchal, postcolonial world In Starry Nights, Shobha De presents Aasha's life as testimony to the possibility of carving out a self in the shadows of male-dominated power – a radical act of re-identification where the individual reclaims the authority to name herself.

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