

Feminine Quest for Identity and Self-Assertiveness in Shobha De's *Starry Nights*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the themes of the feminine quest for identity and self-assertiveness in Shobha De's *Starry Nights*. Shobha De has written about the high socialite women. Her novels deal with the lives of such high society women. She describes the characters of modern women in the contemporary society as they are, riot as they should have been. Through her novels, she wants to express that sex and sensuality are a part of life. In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani seems more powerful and bold than Akshay. Like other heroines of Shobha De, she designs a code of conduct for herself which is free of the prescribed gender roles and sexual restraints of traditional society. Shobha De recognizes the unprivileged position of woman and tries her best to this pattern upside down. She is notable for her understanding of the woman's psyche and her bold and frank treatment of sensitive issues pertaining to women does not present women's sufferings alone. She transforms them into a creative principle of art and beauty. In a male-dominated society, usually a woman is reduced to being a mere object. This reduction of woman as a commodity is a phallogocentric pattern. The women in the novels of Shobha De work to break this image. Her women are assertive, dominating and bold in comparison to their male counterparts. They are not submissive and not feel guilty about their affairs and attitude.

Keywords: Feminism; Desperation; Childhood; Society; Identity

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Shobha De stirred the feminist literature in India and is a modern writer who draws attention towards the problem of upper-class women in society. Through her novels, she throws light on the predicament of Indian women. Her novels have emphasized the value of the equivalence of power. She says that men are not willing to accept it and many men expressed their anxiety over the changed power equation. Shobha De's works got popularity for their inclination towards the fair sex and the graphic depiction, of their pursuits and attitudes. They raise a protest against the male dominated society of India. In this society, women are denied the freedom to act according to their will and to cherish their own dreams.

Women are treated as subordinates. The role of women in society has been changing with each decade of the century. It has left a great influence on sexual modes and social codes in the society, which in turn is well embodied by Shobha De in her characters. In "Contemporary Indian Fiction in English," R.S. Pathak observes, "several contemporary writers have drawn our

attention to the rot that has set in different walks of life. Social evils and individual weaknesses are exposed bluntly" (20).

Shobha De is a feminist in the fullest and the latest sense of the term. She takes up complex issues related to women and treats them with an entirely original approach. She reflects on feminine issues but her approach is more modern than theirs. Her chief aim, as a novelist, is to turn the existing pattern upside down as it is the cause of woman's sufferings and subjection. She pays special attention to the urban Indian women. She strives to present the distorted image of women who cry for freedom and equality which still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. From this perspective, the women in her novels are more powerful than men.

Shobha De has written about the upper society women of modern culture. *Socialite Evenings*, *Sisters*, and *Second Thoughts* deal with the lives of such high society women. She describes the characters of modern women in the contemporary society as they are not as they should be. Through these novels she wants to express that sex and sensuality are a part of life.

Shobha De is not concerned with the traditional concept of morality and love of purity.

Shobha De's *Starry Nights* is a fine example of the feminine quest for identity. It is the story of a ravishingly beautiful film star Aasha Rani, who is also the dream girl of millions of people. In her childhood, she suffers the agony of the unsuccessful relationship of her parents. Her father was a renowned film producer in Madras, who left his wife and daughters for a younger star girl. The girls with their mother find themselves deprived of emotional security in childhood. Aasha Rani has a beautiful and appealing figure. She finds herself in the hands of a film distributor Kishanbhai. He first exploits her physically but later on finds himself in love with her. Meanwhile, her mother, acting as her first pimp, compels her to please big personalities of the cinema world in order to get good roles.

Aasha Rani grows with a disguised feeling of hatred for men. She rejects Kishanbhai's love and falls in love with Akshay Arora, who is top film star. Later in her life, she realizes that it all began as an infatuation towards him. It was Akshay's top position in the film industry, his aristocratic manners and high standard of living that swept her off her feet. Aasha Rani feels like a villager in his presence. Being a middle-class woman, she has a strong desire to become modern by emulating his life. This step proves fatal to her career. Her yearning for freedom from the world of bondage seems obvious.

The novel also presents the dilemma of Akshay's wife, Malini. She has given up her career as a ghazal singer for the sake of her marriage. She tries to get Aasha out of their life with the help of her friend Rita. When Akshay begins to feel that Aasha is being possessive he decides to get rid of her. Aasha is shocked by Akshay's attitude and she falls ill. At this juncture, she gets sympathy from Seth Amirchand. Though deeply connected with the underworld activities, Sethiji is also a member of the Legislative Assembly. He provides her money and helps her in getting into films. The Indian woman in spite of her economic independence

does not feel secure without the protection of men. Aasha too feels secure with Sethiji's support.

Deprived of Akshay's love, Aasha craves for protection which she has expected from him. Unable to find this protection, she recollects her childhood and longs to relive a seven-year-old child in the lap of Amma who rubbed oil into her scalp. She feels tired and emotionally drained. Still longing for Akshay's love, Aasha manages to attend the *mahurat* party, in which he is to come. Aasha's friend Linda advises her to lay off and keep some dignity. Boredom and loneliness in life do not inspire Aasha to work hard. Her heart craves for a normal life. To her, normal persons are those who live outside the film world. Her heart craves for marriage and parenthood. She meets Abhijit at a party who falls in love with her and proposes marriage. She rejects the offer of Abhijit for she knows that he is attracted by her appealing personality. She advises Abhijit to find love in his family.

The feeling of victory of love makes her so crazy that she decides to leave her career to become Akshay's wife and the mother of his children. When she is caught by her mother who calls for an explanation, then for the first time she rebels against her over-powering mother and bursts out. The frustrated Aasha tries to commit suicide, since none of her plans work. Usually, Akshay refuses all interviews and remains silent in every matter related to them. Akshay's rejection breaks her heart and she decides to leave India. Aasha goes to Wellington. Bored, troubled and confused, she meets Jay Philip and in order to get some emotional security, she accepts his offer for marriage and becomes Mrs. Jamie (Jay) Philip. Far from the world of cinema, she leads a family life with a farmer. Now her life fills with love and she is satisfied with her present life. She tries to forget the past. When her husband Jay proposes to visit India with their daughter Sasha, her mother's thoughts shatter her.

On reaching India, Aasha finds herself in totally strange circumstances and feels a kind of responsibility towards her father who is back home and is ill. Amma totally depends upon her younger daughter, Sudha and has also lost her

dictator's image. Sudha has skilfully established a place for herself in Bombay cinema. She prefers to stay in India, especially in the film society. Jay co-operates and leaves for Wellington along with Sasha. Jay gives a chance to Aasha to fulfil her wishes, her responsibility and above all to have a feeling of working and doing something in her life.

Aasha realizes soon that five years have changed everything in the world, including Bombay cinema. Now she gets offers to play the role of the mother figure. The shock is unbearable to her and once again she is ready to have an adulterous relationship with the young producer, Jojo, in order to get a main role in films. From Wellington she receives a call from her daughter that Jay is having an affair with her nanny. She feels shattered, confused and desperate. Afraid of failure and rejection she decides to find out the truth with Jay. On reaching Wellington, she comes to know that her marriage is over; she once again confronts the problem of existence and belongingness. What is her real place in the world? Where does she really belong? Who are her relatives? For whom does she live and who needs her? These thoughts haunt her during her return journey. Her unpromising state of mind makes her land in London where she finds a job. She comes in contact with Shonali, who is a high-class girl of London's political circles. There she finds herself trapped in the web of Tamilian terrorists. Having escaped from the cruel realities of life, she comes back to Madras.

In Madras she is welcomed by every member of her family. Her father's faith gives her strength and courage to restart their old family film studio in Madras. She now has an existence and an opportunity to do something in her life. Instead of escaping from life's responsibilities or yielding to the problems, Aasha chooses straightaway to struggle and survive throughout. She realizes that her roots are very deep in the soil of India, especially in Madras where she can and will grow. Thus, the novel explores a woman's quest for her identity and her place in society.

Shobha De's *Starry Nights* indicates the arrival of the modern Indian woman in society. It

rebels against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. In the novel, she moves far away from describing characters in the tradition of Indian womanhood. She steps out of the bounds of family and tradition, to portray the harsh realities that await a woman outside the four walls of her house. This novel is a story of struggle and survival of a woman in a sex-starved society. Aasha Rani leads to her explorations vis-a-vis her exploitations in a male dominated society. Her exploitation begins with her scheming mother who uses her fifteen-year-old daughter for the sake of money. Her mother thrusts her in the orgy of blue films and forces her to be the bed-mate of producers and distributors. Aasha Rani is sexually exploited by Kishenbhai who gave her the first break in films. Shobha De vividly portrays Aasha Rani's nightmarish experience with her uncle that exposes the hypocrisy of the male-centred and male-dominated value system of our society.

Shobha De highlights Malini in this novel as a traditional wife existing on one extreme of femininity. She wants to possess her husband forever. Malini is fully devoted and dedicated to her star husband Akshay Kumar, who shares his bed with Aasha Rani. Akshay's wife, Malini, could never enjoy the perfection of sex with her legitimate husband. She is more of a woman tied up in the shackles of a lopsided moral order than an individual, a free bird like Aasha Rani. She is ignorant of the simple logic that "being a wife and being a whore were not all that different. It needed Aasha Rani to educate her" (43). Malini's husband wants novelty and rashness in sexual intercourse every time but Malini fails to possess her husband because she cannot be like Aasha Rani. On meeting Aasha Rani she gives a free vent to her violent vituperations showing her wifely jealousy. Aasha Rani takes it coolly and answers in a revealing manner, "Let me show you your face, Malini. Just look at the hatred in your eyes. Is this how you greet your husband when he comes every night? And you wonder why he comes to me?" (49).

Through the character of Rita, Shobha De tries to find a way out for waylaid and betrayed wives like Malini. Rita is a pragmatic wife and

she pleads for a compromise in marital relationship. To her, romance in marriage is a figment of imagination and it finishes the morning after the wedding night. Through Rita's words Shobha De seems to sum up her indictment of marriage as "most women hate their husbands - it's a fact. They hate marriage. That's also a fact. But what else they can do? What is the choice?" The only way to make a marriage work is through sex - and most women hate that too". (50)

Aasha Rani's passionate yet abortive attempt to marry Akshay and later on her real marriage with Jay, are proven failures as she and her kind are not meant for marriage. She is even ready to change her religion and ready to accept Islam to legitimize Akshay's second marriage with her. Her formula of marriage is simplistic. A gloomy Aasha Rani tries to commit suicide in sheer desperation. But after a period of convalescence, she rises like a phoenix to be an emancipated woman again. She is also disillusioned in her attempt to be a wife and mother. Her marriage with Jay in New Zealand also ends up in failure, underlining the futility of marriage at large. What Rita says about the miserable position of married women in India is a matter of deep concern for the feminists of today. She says, "We demand communication, attention, pampering. Arrey baba, forget it. We should be happy if they do not beat us, bum us, torture us, insult us, discard us, that is, all" (117).

Shobha De exposes Aasha Rani's lecherous father-in-law, who tries to tease her sexually. A woman as a wife suffers if she fails to compromise with what remains her *fait accompli*. That's why she is lured back into her original fold- the film world, where she continues to reign as a liberated queen. Towards the end of her reign as a star heroine, Sudha, Aasha Rani's own sister enters, whom her mother throws up in the film-world. Sudha takes the whole society by storm. Shobha De describes Sudha to be even more estimating and designing than her elder sister and mother put together. Without marrying Ajay, she lives with him in the same bungalow. For her, cohabitation and not marriage is the watch-word. Still, she falls a victim to the wicked designs of her enemies. She really pays a very heavy price

for her material achievements. She confesses that she has been rightly punished, "God has punished me. It is nothing else but that. I deserve it. I have been evil. I have sinned" (232).

Aasha Rani unabashedly unleashes a blitzkrieg on the seemingly topless towers of male-chauvinism. The sexual taboos tumble helplessly like a pack of cards. This novel indicates the arrival of the Indian woman in society with a rebellious defiance against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. She has affairs with men of all cues and variety. Aasha Rani may appear odd to a hypocritical Kishanbhai who first took her but she continues to soar up in the realms of dizzying prosperity and also popularity. Once launched in the town of Bombay, she, with an unfeminine vehemence becomes a liberated woman who lives for her own pleasure. In her life, sexual encounters and compromises are a routine affair. Rita the other character of the novel reiterates the feminist concerns. Shobha De's Vamp brand of feminism proves to be the last nail in the coffin of the institution of marriage as it is obvious in her observation, "a wife is acting all the time- this is the world's best - kept secret ... Everything is decided by the bed. On the bed no woman should be foolish enough to be honest with her husband where sex is concerned." (150)

With Linda, Aasha Rani's experience what lesbianism has to teach her. New horizons are opened to her through Linda, who has made her feel wild with excitement. When Aasha goes to Dubai to recover from the trauma of the Akshay - affair Linda is offered lavish hospitality by Badshah, the gold king. Shobha De too reinforces Aasha Rani's plea for liberation through the examples of Sudha, her sister and Sasha, her daughter. De conforms to the Vamp ideology of feminism in the sense that she shows how self-destructive the attempts to achieve liberation have been for Aasha Rani and her sister and will be for others as well.

Aasha Rani suffers a lot due to her relationship, with Akshay Arora. She is humiliated, insulted and rebuked by Akshay's wife Malini who curses her for trying to break her

marriage. Aasha Rani proposes to Akshay to marry her but he does not agree to change his religion. At the peak of her career, she decides to marry a foreigner, Jamie (Jay) whom she had met in London. But her home coming after five years marks a drastic change in her future.

In her fictional world, Shobha De seems to suggest that we have not only an urgent need to demolish the mythical and iconographic images of woman imposed by patriarchal structures but also an urge to conceptualize woman as a composite energy of production, protection and sexuality. Her heroines protest against this massive oppression and exploitation carried through various patriarchal ideological constructs manifest in culture.

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