

The Feminine Experience In Shobha De's Novels

Ms. C. Rajeswari¹, Dr. N. Gejeswari²

¹Guest Lecturer, Department of English. Government Arts & Science College for Women. Orathanadu, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. India. E-Mail: rajisrisuresh2015.rs@gmail.com Cell. No: 9445747052

²Assistant Professor, Department of English. Government Arts & Science College for Women. Orathanadu, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. India. E-Mail: gejepro@gmail.com

Abstract : It is an undeniable fact that today women have come out to demystify and restructure male-defined gender-specific roles. Home and hearth are no more their only destiny, nor bearing and rearing their sole cause for being. Things have changed. A whole new world of opportunities and options is spread ahead them. They are determined to realize their personality, to achieve self-dependency through education and enterprise, and to enjoy the thrill of life as self-reliant persons. Self-development, and not mute submergence in domestic mire, is the big aim of the contemporary woman. Though disparity is there, between the urban and the non-urban, the change is perceptible everywhere, and the women of the day are living not as little female-selves but as splendid human-selves with free will and choices: The new Indian woman has much to celebrate. For more than two decades, the women's movement in our country has a long and a distinguished history, bringing to national notice issues like dowry, female foeticide, infanticide and illiteracy, violence against women and gender discrimination. Not that all these ills have vanished but one of the most positive developments in the past two decades of our national life have been the growing power and status of women. That the coming decade will see an even swifter change in the role Indian women play in all spheres and this will transform the face of our country. Shobha De seeks to narrate the experiences of these women. She is intimate with the realities of the upper-class-urban women's lives, and aims at presenting them in apprehensible colours and tones: As a feminist writer she is gifted with an extraordinary ability to explore intimately the woman's psyche and her problems. Change, it is often said, is a sign of vitality and growth and it is the woman who is almost always working out the changes. There is a paradigm shift in social attitude towards woman today. Shobha De's novels portray the new Indian woman eager to defy the patriarchal hegemony and constantly raises a voice against male dominance.

IndexTerms – Culture, Family, Feminist, Patriarchal Hegemony, Social Attitude.

De's women protagonists experience the difference of being born as females right from the childhood and those experiences remain rooted in their consciousness throughout life. In most of the cases they grow up on indifference and neglect of their father. Their emotion to love, and to be loved remains ill-responded, in turn leaving them unconnected, alone, and alienated. In a sense, their insistent quest for self identification, self-liberation and self-celebration, starts from childhood itself.

In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna is the youngest of the three sisters. She has grown up with the bitter remembrances of her parents attitude to them. It fills her heart with unpleasantness to recapture the early impressions of the childhood days when her parents provided a neglected care to her and her sisters:

It never mattered what the children's preferences were. It was always him. We were left out of their little world. If not left out entirely, then certainly kept carefully on the fringes. Mother gave Father priority, whether it was at meal-times or anytime else. Whatever little time was left over from looking after his needs was then almost absent-mindedly distributed among the three of us. Father rarely spoke directly to us. Anything that he wanted, said, was always routed through mother except when our transgressions required chastizing. Then punishment was swift and direct. In retrospect, I would say he wasn't an unkind or cruel man. Whatever he did to us was done in the brief that he was bringing us up right.¹

Very much like Karuna, Anjali also has lived through the aloofness of her parents, father in particular. She has grown up with the want of fatherly love and care:

My father was too strict and cold. I don't remember him kissing me or any of us or even lightly embracing the children. It was not done to express any emotion, other than anger or disapproval. This was something else I understood perfectly. My own father was an

autocrat and disciplinarian. He believed it wasn't 'manly' to show his feelings, you are far too soft with the children, he'd admonish mother. If you aren't strict with them, they'll take full advantage of you. We never sat in father's lap. Nor did we dare to even tap him to attract his attention. In fact, we rarely addressed him directly—it was always through mother.²

Lack of parental affection is one of the obvious causes of in *Starry Nights* explains about Aasha Rani's dishevelled life. When she was too young to understand the intricacies of life, appa had cruelly discarded her and amma out of his life:

Piecing amma's life together, Aasha Rani knew more or less what had happened. How appa had lost interest in her. How Girija had humiliated her and called her a common prostitute. How appa had abruptly cut off all money, leaving amma with no choice but to sell all her jewellery - and the clothes off her back. That was when the nightmare had begun. Moving out of their luxurious bungalow and into some ugly little place in an over crowded, filthy area.³

Like Appa, Amma too paid little care to her emotional needs. The same Amma who didn't hesitate to thrust her into the dirty world of blue films, hardly ever bothered to discuss about the psychophysical changes which were taking place in her. Aasha Rani discloses it to Kishenbhai:

When I was thirteen. I got my periods early Ten-and-a half. Amma was very angry. As if it was my fault. I felt terrible. I started growing and growing after that.⁴

Amma's reticence in related matters fills her with the feeling of discomfort with herself:

I hated my breasts. Nobody else had such large ones. I couldn't skip or run or jump around like other girls my age. I couldn't wear Pavadai. Even my dance guru made me

feel conscious. He told amma, “This girl should wear saris. Cover her up”. I think it’s God’s curse.⁵

In *Sisters*, Mikki’s father, Seth Hiralal was so busy with himself that he could hardly ever provide her his company. Mikki always missed him, be it moments of jubilation or distress. When she comes to know about his extra-marital affair she fails to reconcile herself:

Mikki’s eyes were beginning to flood. She’d never felt this betrayed before. Her father, always distant, now seemed a total stranger. A stranger who’d led a sneaky double life.⁶

Mikki’s step-sister Alisha remembers her father with some fondness but she is never comfortable with her mother Leelaben. She feels her responsible for all discomfort and inconvenience in her life. Alisha craves for her recognition as Seth Hiralal’s daughter but the illegitimacy of her mother’s relation with him makes it difficult. With growing years her scorn for her mother also goes spiralling up. She has a very low opinion about her mother and she has one strong reason for it. She had observed that besides maintaining an illicit affair with Seth Hiralal, Leelaben was on flirtatious terms with some other men also:

Her contempt for her mother was growing with every passing day and it was hard for her to disguise it. All that show of sorrow! Huh! It wasn’t as if she’d been true and faithful to Papa... Alisha recalled some of her mother’s lovers, including a family chauffeur. She remembered her father storming into their apartment and confronting her. And her mother’s drunken giggle before, Papa’s hand came smashing into her face. Alisha shuddered at the memory of the countless times her mother would sneak into her room followed by some awful looking man she’d probably picked up at a party. And Alisha would lie awake in her bed listening to their tinny laughter followed later by grunts and moans... Alisha had accepted the fact a long time ago-her mother was a slut.⁷

In *Snapshots*, Noor is also a neglected girl-child. She is born and brought up in a financially opulent family. But she has faintly received parental love. The Begum, her mother lived in a private sealed-off environment and behaved like a self-absorbed woman. She was so preoccupied with herself that she had no time to share with her children. The children had to seek her permission even to see her.

It was Naani to whom Noor turned for everything - a grazed shin, a cut finger, and the deeper, invisible wounds inflicted by uncaring parents.⁸

Noor remembers her parents sniffy attitude to her:

She knew that her mother was extremely ashamed of her appearance and turned her delicate face away to avoid noticing her dowdy daughter. The Nawab barely looked in her direction and when he did, it was generally to cadge small change.⁹

In *Second Thoughts*, Maya too grows up on impenetrable indifference of her parents. Both of them remained distanced to her as if they had already drawn some clear-cut lines which were not to be transgressed ever. In Maya's own words:

My mother and I had a strange relationship. We were wary of each other most of the time. I could never tell what she actually felt towards me apart from a strong sense of duty. While I could rarely cross over to her side and demonstrate warmer sentiments. If she was inhibited, so was I. As for my father, it was even harder to figure out what he truly made of either of us. He left my mother strictly alone, preferring to lead a quiet, pensive, secluded existence in his side of the home. With me, he was affectionate in a detached sort of way. Far too shy to ever hold me close or kiss me, he would sometimes pat my head stiffly while passing, nothing beyond that. If I ever ran into his room unannounced, he'd all but jump out of his skin and look so startled, I'd feel like an absolute intruder. Climbing onto his bed and stretching out by his side was unthinkable. Nor could I initiate

a touch by reaching out for his hand or clinging onto his arm. Not that he ever told me anything - it was implicitly understood. He shrank away from physical contact so visibly, it would have been the worst sort of imposition to force the issue.¹⁰

Thus, we see that in most of the cases parent-child relations are anxiety-ridden and maladjusted. And also that aberrations like depression, inhibition, low self-esteem, suicidal inclinations etc, which are observed in the female protagonists mature years are but outcome of their traumatic childhood.

De's females are excelling beauties. In spite of their choice of professions and the ruggedness involved in those enterprises they capaciously maintain their virtue and verve. They try to wield their full control over their jestful liveliness in all affairs. They want to realize the tincture and tingle of life and therefore they keep themselves interested in the merits of their charms. Self is their priority and self-admiration their creed. Whether in private or in public, they are always presentably gorgeous. In doing so they are not displaying their vanity or fickle-mindedness. To look captivating and beautiful is a natural attribute of a woman.

To conclude, Shobha De is observantly particular about registering the socio-economic transformations which have changed the creamy urban class of India. Most of the women figures in her novels have thrown off traditional bastions of domestic duties. Moving out of the traditional household they have proved their potential in the cut-throat world of competition and opportunism. They are the women with synthesis thinking who have adapted themselves successfully at office and home both. As mothers, companions, colleagues, and caretakers, these women have made difficult choices and made them work. They are the women who have remained undaunted by the male domination in the professions of their choice. Bursting out of the corseted confines of traditional femininity, they have broken

boundaries, taboos and habits at every term. Rebuffing the violence and hatred and exploitation and discrimination of their husbands, lovers, colleagues and peers, they have proved their worth as women of “Personhood and dignity”.

REFERENCES

1. Shobha De, *Socialite Evening* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 12.
2. Ibid., p. 41.
3. Shobha De, *Starry Nights*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1991), pp. 68-69.
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. Ibid., p. 6.
6. Shobha De, *Sisters*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p. 12.
7. Ibid., p. 25.
8. Shobha De, *Snapshots*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995), p. 52.
9. Ibid., p. 61.
10. Shobha De, *Second Thoughts*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996), pp. 69-70.