

Defying the Old Shackles: Redefining the New Women in Shobha De's Works

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Abstract

Traditionally, women are celebrated as embodiments of sacrifice and suffering, as monuments of patience and devotion. They are depicted enacting various roles – as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters – but never as individuals claiming their lives as their own, where they can seek personal gratification and self-fulfilment. This paper analyses Shobha De's selected novels, *Starry Nights* and *Socialite Evenings*, to explore how the female characters challenge the institution of marriage, defying outdated patriarchal norms that expect women to be submissive and passive, heralding an awakening of women to a new understanding of their place and position within the family and society. By concentrating on the individuality and independence exhibited by these women, the paper investigates the evolving dynamics of women's roles and status in society, particularly within the context of metropolitan culture and elite postmodern India.

Keywords: *New Woman, Metropolitan Culture, Patriarchy, Elite Society.*

The term 'New Woman' signifies the awakening of women to a new understanding of their place and position within the family and society. She is aware of her individuality and is determined to fight for equal rights alongside men. Traditionally, women are celebrated as embodiments of sacrifice and suffering, as monuments of patience and devotion. They are depicted enacting various roles – as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters – but never as individuals claiming their lives as their own, wherein they can seek personal gratification and self-fulfilment. Jane Wagner's lines illuminate the position of women in traditional society in *The Search for Signs*, "I am sick of being the victim / of trends I reflect / but don't even understand" (53). Expected to be submissive and passive, she is taught to sacrifice in the

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interest of her family and live under the protection of either her parents or her husband. Anita Desai exposes the grinding suppression of women in India:

Even if in reality she is nothing but a common drudge, first in her father's house and then her husband's — a beast of burden bearing an endless string of children, putting up with any brutality or disloyalty or failing of her husband — she has no alternative: she must live as Sita did, as Draupadi did; she is Durga incarnate. The myth keeps her bemused, bound hand and foot. To rebel against it — either in speech or action — would mean that she is questioning the myth, attacking the legend and that cannot be permitted: it is the cornerstone on which the Indian family therefore Indian society are built. (972)

However, traditional perceptions of women have undergone significant changes with the advent of the Women's Liberation Movement. Women have started to challenge male dominance in society. Women authors like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, and many others have made women's issues the focal point of their works. Through the eyes of these women writers, we can glimpse a new world of liberated women who question the institution of marriage and refuse to be puppets in the hands of men under the guise of traditions and societal expectations. They critique the accepted values and social norms that stifle women's individuality. "[C]onscious of their emotional needs", they call for "a change of order that starves them of individual fulfillment" and yearn for an environment "congenial for self-expression and conducive to self-fulfillment" (Bai 27). The modern woman, capable of leading an independent and fulfilling life, is unwilling to endure suffering and sacrifice. She seeks freedom and asserts her individuality, challenging traditional moral codes to achieve her dreams, which often leads to the breakdown of conventional marriages and families.

Shobha De confronts the conventional perception of Indian women as submissive and weak, showcasing an authentic portrayal of the modern woman who opposes traditional practices of female oppression and asserts her rights against injustice. De's female protagonists come from affluent backgrounds in urban settings. They are well-educated, confident, financially independent, and empowered individuals. Rejecting conventional roles, they pursue glamorous careers in fields like advertising, journalism, acting, modelling, and even entrepreneurship, living life at a fast pace. They do not idolize their husbands or regard marriage as the most prized relationship. Anita Myles quotes Shobha De about her women characters: "The women in my books are definitely not doormats. They are not willing to be kicked around" (86). As S. P. Swain comments:

Shobha De offers the picture of women not only as protagonists but also as motivating factors in society, initiating and regulating their own lives as well as the lives of others in the voluptuously fascinating world of Bombayites, its enticing glitter and glamour enamouring many a Karunas to its ensnaring and captivating gossamer. (91)

Although educated and independent, the inner lives of these women are not untouched by pain, trauma, alienation, and insecurity. De has depicted the agony that lies beneath the gloss and glitter of their lives. Yet, these women emerge as a force to be reckoned with in this society. In her novels, *Karuna*, *Anjali*, *Ritu*, and *Aasha Rani*, rebelling against conventions and the patriarchal set-up, step into new roles, discarding the marginalized identities where their entire existence is viewed in relation to men. While striving for a new independent identity, they grapple with guilt, uncertainty, and insecurity, but manage to overcome this crisis. This reflects their unwillingness to accept life passively, but rather as a challenge to be faced with courage.

Shobha De's new women demonstrate a strong will to break free from societal constraints that restrict their pursuit of dreams and desires. This contrasts sharply with the conditioning of women in traditional society, where the woman is not encouraged to take her own needs seriously. To explore them, to try to act on them as a separate individual. She is enjoined from engaging all of her own resources and thereby prevented from developing some valid and reliable sense of her own worth. Instead, the woman is encouraged to concentrate on the needs and development of man. (Singh 99)

On the contrary, De's female protagonists prioritize their ambitions and won't hesitate to use any means to achieve their goals. In *Socialite Evenings*, *Anjali* and *Karuna* are middle-class women. Challenging her traditional middle-class values, *Karuna* pursues modelling against her father's wishes. Fascinated by the glamorous, enchanting world of riches, they both marry wealthy members of society, seeing these marriages as a way to access the allure of luxury and sophistication. *Anjali* marries *Abe*, a rich man known for his notorious reputation with women, aiming to escape middle-class life and indulge in luxury. Unlike traditional women, these women challenge marital commitments and conventional moral values if they fail to meet their expectations. *Anjali* values sexual gratification within marriage; when denied such pleasure, she refuses to suffer in silence as is traditionally expected of her. Rejecting the moral standards imposed on women, she seeks fulfilment outside her marriage. When *Ritu*, another female character in the novel, finds her marriage unexciting, she engages in an affair with *Gul* for pleasure. Likewise, *Karuna*, feeling her marriage dull and monotonous due to her husband's inconsideration of her desires, turns to her husband's friend *Krish* to fulfil her sexual desires. This illustrates that these new women are more aware of their bodies and are unwilling to repress their sexuality, viewing it as a vital aspect of life and marriage. In "Sex as Sedative", Shobha De discusses the changed perspectives of women regarding sexuality, "She is

definitely more confident, more assertive and more demanding. Besides — she can afford to be all that. No man can take her for granted. She expects and gets Sex on her terms now’(xxi)”. De further quotes the viewpoint of a mid-thirties careerist who considers:

‘Sex is about pleasure, not power. But yes, ... I’m also through with men who label independent-minded women “nymphos” just because they (the women) are unwilling to play the old subjugated roles. To me, sex is something special, something beautiful, something shared. If a man doesn’t feel the same way about it, I don’t have the time for him.’ (Sex as Sedative xxi)

The new women seek partners who can provide them comfort and warmth in relationships; they refuse to be subjugated and assert their independence. They are not binding vines that bow meekly; instead, they fight back, resist, and voice their opinions. Karuna, defying conventional moral standards, openly declares her love for Krish in front of her husband: “I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him — in Venice” (Socialite 296). Instead of feeling guilty, she exposes the true nature of their superficial marriage and expresses her bitter feelings toward her husband.

I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We’ve got nothing going. I don’t love you — never have. As for you — I really don’t know to this day why you chose to marry me. I don’t think you even know who you are married. You don’t have a clue what sort of a woman I am. I’m tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerism; the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into your overall scheme of things. (Socialite 293)

Throughout the novel, Karuna is depicted as a woman who asserts her individuality through protest and defiance. Rosemary Hennessy argues that the new woman is explicitly portrayed as a transgressor through various signifiers of the un-feminine. She is characterized as a professional career woman, liberated and equal to men. She appears in popular films, magazines, articles, advertisements, and novels. She seems to be situated outside of marriage and thus liberated in that sense. She is presented as “dark”, single, and uninterested in children, “crushing to men, not pretty, simply dressed, sallow-complexioned and unblushing — all of which mark her as violating the acceptable norms of white, middle-class heterosexual femininity” (105). To borrow the words of Mary Wollstonecraft, Karuna is not “the toy of man, his rattle”, which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (36).

Shobha De subtly raises questions about women’s sexuality, their self-identity, and a crucial aspect—gender bonding. Anita Myles notes, “Shobha De is preoccupied with sexuality because she feels that this is an area in which women have been repressed and perhaps this is an area which is best for rediscovering their individuality as human beings” (104). Simon de Beauvoir

describes how men perceive women primarily as a sexual being, "... she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex — absolute sex, no less" (16). Therefore, in a patriarchal society, woman is often reduced to just an object. This is what is called "sexual politics," which, for Kate Millett, refers to "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23). She further explains, "Through this system a most ingenious form of 'inner colonization' has been achieved ... However, muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25). De's women are daring, ambitious, and eager to challenge the traditional system of age-old values that aim to reinforce male dominance. They exploit men for their own ambitions by leveraging their sexual power. These women have outsmarted the system by embracing the challenges of high society life and turning it to their advantage. Karuna learns from Ritu the tricks to control and manipulate men, "The trick is to make them feel you've done them a favour by marrying them. Once you achieve that, the equation works out" (Socialite 129), and "men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment" (Socialite 131). They do not feel guilty about being diplomatic with their husbands, as Ritu states, "I look after his mother, his home, his needs. Why shouldn't I expect something in return" (Socialite 130).

The new women do not suppress their carnal desires and indulge in the forbidden fruit of promiscuity without fearing its disastrous consequences. Although their satisfaction is fleeting, they break free from the bonds and norms that restrict their freedom to pursue their desires. Anjali, Ritu, Karuna, Aasha Rani—all have a string of extramarital affairs. These relationships serve as an antidote to their dull marital lives. While great writers like Tolstoy and Flaubert depicted illicit passion as a tragedy or sin, for which the hero or heroine paid with their lives; in contemporary society, such affairs are seen as adventures in the monotonous lives of women from high society.

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani uses her sexuality to pursue her desire for stardom. Despite being sexually exploited by many producers and directors, she turns her sexuality into a weapon to achieve success and fame in the film industry. L. Sonia Ningthoujam describes the attitude of liberated women, saying, "These new women drink, attend late-night parties like men and refuse to remain at their mercy; rather they are out to teach men a lesson. The new woman is all set to turn the table upside down, and all notions of respectability and morality are sent crashing down the drain" (37). Sexual encounters and compromises are common in Aasha

Rani's life, but as a modern woman, she rejects male superiority and double standards- men can choose any woman, but women are expected to stay loyal. She challenges this unfair moral system. When Kishanbhai criticises her relationships with other men, she replies, "Didn't you too sleep with me? Where were your scruples then? You also had a wife. And children. You used me. You exploited me. So how are you any different from Akshay" (Starry 14)? Many heroines like her use their bodies as tools to pursue their ambitions, often ignoring the industry's dark side. They embody the modern woman who uses every means to reach her goals, feeling neither shame nor obligation. As Aasha Rani says when Kishanbhai expects gratitude for introducing her to films, "You financed and produced my first film, Kishanbhai, but you extracted payment from my body. ... So don't throw ahsan on me. I owe you nothing" (Starry 21).

New modes of sexual life reflect contemporary social realities and the candid approach of modern women to sex which is not restricted to the opposite sex only but includes same-sex relations as well. They view lesbianism as the most justified form of sexual independence. Aasha Rani has a passionate relationship with Linda, her journalist friend. Prior to this, she experienced lesbian pleasure in Dubai, which she describes as "an experience so sensuous, so arousing, so complete" (Starry 112). She has had several sexual encounters with men but all these men use her for their own pleasure and ignore her feelings. Aasha Rani never derives genuine enjoyment from these encounters as they are always brutal, wild, and insensitive. It is her relationships with Thai girls in Dubai where she experienced the absolute pleasure. Anne-Marie Fauret, a lesbian activist, advocates for lesbian relationships over heterosexuality, stating, "As lesbians, it is love we want to speak about. We've had enough of man showing off his sex and his ego all by himself" (qtd. in Bonnet 50). Aasha Rani's lesbian relationships highlight the desire of the new woman to make every experience meaningful and fulfilling. Therefore, lesbianism is also part of the rebellious spirit of the new woman, as seen in Aasha Rani and Linda's relationship, which is a rebellion against the patriarchal setup of our society. Thus, in De's novels, male domination is challenged, as women dismiss men as unimportant, even in their sexual lives. Lesbianism, therefore, is an attempt to fulfil the desires denied to women in heterosexual relationships: Simon de Beauvoir highlights the tenderness of women's love in contrast to the power and possession inherent in heterosexual relations, "Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no

victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality” (406).

Aasha Rani utilizes her sexual power as a survival strategy in the challenging film industry. By wielding this power, she overcomes the struggle for survival and achieves success in her career. She emerges as a resilient woman, as no sexual encounter, however harsh or brutal, can damage her conscience or mind. She remains indifferent to her sexual partners, “[b]ut her mind remained her own” (Starry 103). However, Shobha De’s women are not merely sex symbols; they possess strong personalities and make brave choices to survive in society. They resist men who try to dominate them and fight for equality. These modern urban women have shifted from being objects to individuals, seeking a new social identity. Although they enjoy freedom and fame, their lives are not always without difficulties. They face anxiety, insecurities, and pain as they strive to assert their individuality. Their promiscuous sexual behaviour may attract labels of loose morals, but they do not care about false reputations. Failing to find joy and happiness in marriage condemns these women to loneliness and existential distress. When Karuan finds no joy in her marriage and looks for satisfaction outside it, she reveals her inner feelings, “But I knew too from this experience that I wasn’t up to adultery for adultery’s sake and the grand romance I was looking for just seemed not to exist” (Socialite 305). They seek their high ideals of romance in their relationships; Karuna admits her purpose, “All I wanted at that point was to meet someone mature, sensitive, intelligent, funny and sympathetic” (Socialite 102). These self-assured and independent women appreciate partners who display “scholarship” and “literary passions” and help them balance their instinctual and intellectual needs (Socialite 103).

Indian women have often been depicted as symbols of pain, hardship, and struggle, always at the mercy of men. However, Shobha De’s female protagonists value their independence more than the false security offered by traditional marital relationships. Despite facing demanding circumstances and vulnerabilities, they refuse to submit to male dominance and choose to live life on their own terms. Karuna exemplifies the determination of modern women—educated and enlightened; she does not meekly surrender to social pressures but reacts against her husband’s hypocrisy. Even when pregnant and her husband wishes to end their marriage, she is not heartbroken; instead, she moves on and finds her own identity and independence. Man plays no central role in her life. Simone de Beauvoir supports the modern woman’s quest for independence: “The women of today in a fair way dethrone the myth of femininity; they are

beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways” (29). Karuna’s mother, endorsing the traditional view that security lies in marriage, advises her to marry, saying, “A woman needs a man’s protection. Society can be very cruel” (Socialite 440). Karuna not only rejects this advice but also questions the very foundation of patriarchy.

But Mother, why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don’t really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I’m not answerable to anyone. I don’t feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage ... I can’t make any “sacrifices”— not now. (Socialite 441-42)

Karuna finds herself free from marital bonds and looks at life afresh. She comes across as a strong woman, not a victim. Her male counterpart Ranbir Roy, a reporter, finds her, “... disgustingly self-assured and revoltingly self-sufficient” (Socialite 490). Regarding De’s treatment of her female characters, Swain says, “Like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De does not overdo women’s sufferings. She transforms it into a creative principle of art and beauty” (95). Karuna is happy to be back within the fold of the family. She finds intimacy and warmth in her parents.

De also highlights the negative side of the new woman’s freedom. In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna is a symbol of positive power, but “... in Winnie it is a negative force, the destructive image, the image of Kali” (97), says Swain. Male characters see her as a “strange and powerful woman” who can destroy anyone (Socialite 422). Another influential woman is Linda, a journalist in *Starry Nights*, who leverages her power to advance her career. She exemplifies a clever new woman who uses pen and people for her own benefit. She declares, “Hire me. If you don’t like my writing then fire me. ... I’m a queen. A gossip queen. Everybody is scared of my pen. You’d better be nice to me, or else I’ll make chutti of you in my column” (Starry 130). She can make or break the image of any star. Despite her physical intimacy with Aasha Rani, she does not spare her from criticism. Aasha Rani describes her as “a female fox or a she-wolf on the prowl” (Starry 131). Like other characters in the novel, she also exploits others and would not like human relationships to come in the way of her goals. She is opportunistic and candidly states, “I am a survivor, yaar’. ... In this badmaash city and this badmaash business, you have to be one” (Starry 131).

Rich, intelligent, and strong, these women face the world on their own terms. Whether it is Karuna, Anjali, or Ritu in *Socialite Evenings*, they find strength and pursue independence despite their fears and vulnerabilities. Marriages to wealthy men do not offer emotional or

physical security to them. Anjali, initially feeling weak and seeking security in marriage or with her sexual partners, eventually overcomes this after failed relationships and marriages. She then turns to spirituality, becomes a successful businesswoman and establishes her identity as “the most wanted ‘interiors’ woman” (Socialite 315). She states, “A woman has to be self-sufficient these days” (Socialite 224). Swain notes, “Shobha De has fully exposed the feminine world of the characters since for her humanness should be identified with “femininity” because as Marilyn French observes, “A masculine world is less fully human than a feminine one” (qtd. in Swain 101). These women build selfless bonds with each other, helping each other through hardships rather than relying on their husbands. For example, Karuna helps Anjali when a foreign writer assaults her, and Anjali supports Karuna during her pregnancy when her husband divorces her. Anjali offers Karuna shelter and a lucrative job, reminding her of her early days as a model under her supervision and her desire to protect her from the harsh world: “I wanted to protect you and keep you a virgin forever. Seal you off from the world of men. Warn you about them. Tell you never to get married and make the sort of mistakes I did” (Socialite 363).

Karuna serves as a trendsetter for other women. Similarly, Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* also emerges as a strong woman despite facing sexual exploitation and a broken marriage. She courageously stands against a harsh society. She has many sexual partners but no single life partner. In Bombay, she has no genuine friends. Frustrated by boredom, loneliness, and deception, she moves to New Zealand, where she marries Jamie (Jay) Philips and has a daughter named Sasha, who brings happiness into her life. She values her role as a mother. After her marriage fails, she returns to India and stays with her parents, caring for her sick father. Like Karuna, she is able to reconcile with her parents, especially her father, who abandoned his mother, which is why Aasha Rani had to struggle hard for survival in a tough world. This reconciliation is mainly possible because of her love for Sasha. She begins to understand the child-parent relationship, and her “anger, the sense of betrayal-had vanished” towards her parents and was “replaced with something that was nearly affection” (Starry 389-90). After reconciling with her parents, Aasha Rani feels a sense of belonging. Her father’s faith in her gives her confidence to face life and restart their old family film studio in Madras. She has something meaningful to do in her life. She cares for her sister, Sudha, and helps restore her confidence to face the cruel realities of life. Aasha Rani, after many male partners, ends up all alone, but she is stronger than before. Now she does not need any man in her life. She chooses to live life on her own terms. Both sisters are determined to emerge as a power together

— “The two of us together will re-open appa’s studio — our studio. We will make films, good films, and we will survive. Not just survive, but prosper” (Starry 398). Nisha Trivedi, commenting on Aasha Rani’s character, says:

Instead of escaping from life’s responsibilities, or yielding to the problems, Aasha chooses the right way of struggling and surviving through it. ... The glittering world of cinema is in reality so ruthless, so miserable that it can shatter the moral values and innocence of any human being. But Aasha survives and achieves success. (109-110)

The novel, portraying the reality of the Bombay film industry with its lustful, sordid, and shady characters, depicts the struggle of a young woman trying to survive in the harsh and ruthless film world. Despite all the challenges, hardships, and exploitation she has faced as a film actress, she dreams of her daughter joining the film industry and living her life on her own terms, “With no one telling them how to live life. No heart breaks, no disappointments no compromises” (Starry 400). It highlights the strength of a woman who is no longer afraid of society or life.

Considering Shobha De's contribution to women’s writings, L. Sonia Ningthoujam quotes her words: “I write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the women’s situation” (101). Shyam Asnani compares Nayantra Sahgal with Shobha De, stating, “Nayantara Sahgal comes close to Shobha De in strongly protesting the denial of freedom to Indian women. She believes in “New Humanism and “New Morality”, according to which the woman is not to be taken as a “sex object and a glamour doll, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into a passive role that requires no individual identity” (qtd. in Ningthoujam 50). G. D. Barche also advocates for women: “Assert yourself. Don’t suppress it. Let it grow and flourish, never mind how many things it destroys in the bargain” (17). The women of today no longer accept condescension from men. They can do even better than men in every field of activity. Shobha De herself talks about the unconventional attitude and power of the modern woman who is out to grapple for equal power with men. De observes in *Shooting from the Hip: Selected Writings*:

Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level ... control over the situation has been a male prerogative over century. Women’s destinies have been determined largely in that context alone ... It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power. Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and explored for the furtherance of overall human development. The very concept of sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive. When one talks of shakti unleashed, one also remembers the two connotations of Shakti ... the destructive avtaar is as potent as the creative one. It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that leads to creative and dynamic harmony. ... Men will have to come to terms with woman power. (111).

Thus, the new women assert their own identity. They are daring and possess the courage and stamina to face the realities and stresses of high society. They are not afraid of facing every brick thrown in their way, in their endeavour to lead lives on their own terms. They have big dreams and aspire for money, power, success, and fame. They are prepared to go to any lengths to realize their aspirations. They emerge as powerful individuals in modern society.

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