

Quest for Identity: A Study of Shobha De's *Starry Nights*

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English has a galaxy of women writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, and Shobha De, who have successfully portrayed the varied images of women in Indian society. They have shown Indian women's situation in society. Shobha De, a versatile woman writer has aptly raised a strong voice against the exploitation of women in Indian society. Her novels primarily aim is to reveal the truth in Indian society. The present paper studies *Starry Nights* (1991) and points out the ugly reality of the lives of women. Women are looked down upon. Though they are faithful and hardworking in their family their existence remains unrewarded. They find themselves at the margins in families as well as in society. *Starry Nights* reveals the truth of Indian Bollywood where women are treated like commodities. The paper observes and analyses the changing mindset of Indian women who are ready to defy the set norms of the society that limit their existence. The paper confirms that the women depicted in De's *Starry Nights* are the agents of social change who try to find out their own identity in the society.

Keywords: *Exploitation, gender, patriarchy, social change, quest for identity, empowerment.*

Introduction

Shobha De, one of the feminists from Indian Writing in English, delineates the humiliation, suffering, and victimization of women due to patriarchy. Her writing reflects a strong rebellion against the set norms in society. Her role as a novelist in the era of the 21st century has its own significance because of the different treatment given to her female characters. She has

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discussed the issues of marriage and man- woman relationships in her novels. Man woman relationship is a focal point of discussion by many women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya etc. They have tried to show the importance of man-woman relationships in their works. Shobha De also believes that men and women should live together with mutual respect. She has given sexual freedom to her females, and her objective here is to show female subjugation and to provide a solution to it. Her first novel, *Socialite Evening*, attacks upon the degradation of moral values in society. As Dr. S. David Soundar and S. Kalidas asserts:

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 women imposed by patriarchal structures but also an urge to conceptualise women 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. (3396)

Man woman relationships are well explored in her second novel *Starry Nights*. The women characters especially Geetha and her daughter Asha Rani, have entirely different perspectives on marriage and man-woman relationships. They are ready to take a strong stand against the traditional patriarchal norms of marriage. Marriage is a social institution where man and woman aspire to live together to pursue happiness. Many times, it is observed that age-old patriarchy becomes a barrier in the relationship. Men's ego never wants women to disobey. Therefore, many relationships are disturbed. The objective of the paper is to study De's *Starry Nights* to highlight the exploitation of women due to male domination in marital relationships. The female protagonist becomes a rebel and breaks the social conventions of marriage. Because they do not feel satisfied in marriages due to continuous exploitation at home. The women feel vulnerable if they are not respected. They carry the burden of injustice meted out to them by their family as well as society. As a result, they feel suffocated. Shobha De attacks patriarchy and warns that if men do not change their mindset and continue to humiliate females, it will cause more trouble for them as well as for the whole family. The paper attempts to study De's *Starry Nights* as a feminist novel where females struggle to form their identities. As Priyanka Mahajan asserts,

Shobha De has also tried to add an additional feature to the personality of her new women by bringing in the economic factor as an indispensable part of their power struggle in society. She firmly believes that the equal allocation of power between men and women is indispensable for a healthy society and

women cannot attain existence until or unless they are economically reliant. Her works may be considered as the beginning of a new realisation among women about their economic standing and their anxiousness about redefining their identities. (104)

Review of Literature

There are many Indian women novelists like Kamala Das, Anita desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale who have depicted the sufferings and humiliation of women in Indian society due to patriarchy.

Quest for identity is a primary concern for the females who are oppressed, exploited, and marginalized under the heavy burden of patriarchy. Truly speaking, liberty is a key to human growth; if it is missing, the humans feel meaningless. The female writers always find that females do not get freedom. They are compelled to live life at the margins. Their roles are defined by society and not by themselves. They do not have their own choices. The female authors want to bring the sufferings of women to the limelight through their novels. The attempt is to give voice to the voiceless because they believe women can assert their identity. Shashi Deshpande, a significant female author from the tradition of Indian writing in English, depicts women's struggle to find their true identity in society. Her masterpieces *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine* portray the subjugation of women on account of patriarchy.

Since ages, women are considered secondary, and they are treated as slaves. As Javeed Ahmad Raina writes in his article,

The history of every civilization shows that women have always been subordinated to a position where they have no means to re-claim their unique identity unless and until they re-visit the history, explore it and finally re-establish it through their own experiences and insights. In order to explore their own unique identity, women have to define themselves against the male informed ideals and beliefs that are passed down from generation to generation. (3372).

Mary Wollstonecraft's book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), is the precursor for such suffragette movements. She is considered the foremother of British feminist criticism and provided insights to suffragettes to fight the battle for women's rights. In this book, she advocates for equal social and moral rights for women. The second wave feminist movement began in the 1960s. It was associated with diverse thinkers, and many outstanding works have appeared in the literary field. The major works of second wave feminism include but are not limited to - Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (1949), Elaine Showalter, *The*

Literature of their own (1977), Kate Millett *Sexual Politics* (1969), Ellen Moers *Literary Women* (1976), Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (1968).

De's *Starry Nights* belongs to the feminist tradition of Indian writing in English. In this respect, it is important to study the three waves of feminism. Feminism is a movement that struggles for the rights of women. Firstly, it is to be noted that feminism has the objectives such as to eradicate exploitation of women, providing space for women equally to males in all spheres, to establish equality in the society etc.

Feminism is an umbrella term for a number of cultural phenomena. It tries to acquire freedom for women to work, and make independent economically, and psychologically (Malinowska)

This movement is divided into four waves. The term waves indicate the different eras in the field of feminism. The first wave of feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. This movement is linked with the first formal women's rights convention which was held in 1848. The first wave of feminism got insights from the French Revolution, the Temperance Movement, and the abolitionist movement. Many women participated in the French Revolution, although they were considered passive citizens during that period. Their participation created a significant impact on the psyche of the female community. It was a source of inspiration for them. Mary Wolstonecraft is considered a mother of first-wave feminism. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is a masterpiece in the field of feminism. She emphasizes the principles of equality for men and women in this book and education as a significant tool to empower women. Second-wave feminism is a period from the 1960s to 1980s. The important events in this period were the Equal Pay Act, legalizing abortion, etc. Betty Friedan and Gloria Stienman were prominent figures in this movement. Third-wave feminism dates from the early 1990s to 2010. The critical issues of the third wave were sexual liberation, individuality, fighting against all oppression, etc.

The third-wave feminist movement was a continuation and reaction to second-wave feminism, which began in the 1990s and extended into postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and gender studies. Literary scholars believe that there is the fourth wave of feminism, which started in 2012 which is associated with technology like facebook, twitter, instagram, and other social networking. Tarana Burke used the phrase "Me Too" in 2006 to empower women. Her

objective was to reach those young and vulnerable women who were exploited and became victims of violence against women.

Shobha De, who belongs to the rich literary tradition of fourth-wave feminism, attempts to break social norms and traditional beliefs. The present paper dwells upon the idea of feminism, with the final goal of establishing equality between men and women. The selected work comments on the necessity of the principles of equality and liberty to develop harmony between man and woman. It especially studies De's *Starry Nights* and discusses the theme of the quest for identity. Quest for identity is a much-discussed issue in gender studies. Women's identity is socially constructed. There are a few key aspects related to the identity of women which require discussion. Due to stereotypes in the male-dominated society, like males are breadwinners and women are good at cooking, women's identity is considered as weaker sex. They are treated as secondary. In Indian families, it has been observed that males make decisions, and females are expected to obey them. These stereotypes have completely devalued the image of women. They are expected to follow certain marriage traditions. Boys do visit the respective proposals sent by the girl's family. If he likes the girl, it is taken as a final settlement. The girl's parents never ask her whether she likes the boy or not. It is assumed that once any boy agrees to marry her, she must obey the family tradition of giving her consent. The present novel shatters the stereotypes set by Indian society. The female protagonist does not believe in the falsehood of marriage. She does not limit her life to the confines of marriage. She sees herself beyond marriage. She wants to explore herself in the field of Bollywood. The most important thing is that though she falls prey to the pseudo status of Indian Bollywood and its culture, her attempt towards identity formation makes us think about gender discrimination and its negative impact on marriages, man-woman relationships, and the human psyche. There are remarkable works done in this area like Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004), Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998). All these works have tried to define a woman's identity in a male-dominated society. Their primary concern is to reveal the truth in the lives of women, their humiliation, exploitation, and marginalization due to social forces. Shobha De, too, continues the feminist tradition of the earlier female writers from the canon of Indian Writing in English.

Nidhi Thakur's thesis entitled 'The Novels of Shobha De: A Study in Cultural Feminism' takes into account the aspect of feminism in Shobha De's novels. As she comments:

In fact as a writer Shobha De differs considerably from other women novelists. She concentrates on the upper class Indian women and their lifestyles with intimate understanding. Her novels indicate the arrival of a new woman eager to defy rebelliously against the well entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. As a result, her female characters are modern, fashionable and they take bold decisions to survive in society. (18)

Raj Kumar Tharu, in her article 'Feminist Consciousness in the Select Fictions of Shobha De' attempts to show rising consciousness in the females of the 21st century. The paper concludes that De's women are courageous and ready to take a strong stand against the oppressive forces in society. The other researcher Mehak Jonjua, in her article 'Evolution of New Women in Shobha De's Novels' finds out the element of quest for identity in De's novels. The paper highlights women's struggle, as shown in De's novels, to survive in a male-dominated society. No concrete research has been found on Shobha De's single work. Therefore, the present paper attempts to show the theme of the quest for identity in De's *Starry Nights*.

Shobha De's *Starry Nights*

Starry Nights is a novel that unfolds the ugly reality in Bollywood. The female protagonist Asha Rani, is a victim of the glamorous world of Bollywood. Her mother, Geetha Devi already has a plan in her mind to promote her daughter in cinemas. She is not concerned about what her daughter actually wants. However, her primary aim is to use her daughter's beauty as an asset to receive offers for films. It shows her survival strategies to cope up in society.

Like all her novels, *Starry Nights* depicts a woman's struggle against societal evils. In the novel, a woman tries to find a name and a position in a male-dominated society. In a male-dominated society, there are stereotypes like men are breadwinners and females are good at cooking. However, De's females challenge these social notions. The novel is a narrative of a woman named Asha Rani; through her, Shobha De attempts to reveal the ugly face of Bollywood, where women are compelled to sell their bodies. The patriarchy has devalued women by considering them as objects of wish fulfillment. The men always look at women as a means of sensual pleasure. *Starry Nights* exposes this sad truth brilliantly. It is observed in the novel that women are asked to fulfill the sensual needs of the film producers in order to receive some favour. The ladies who are completely ignorant of this reality easily fall prey to the male dominance, and they are seduced. Asha Rani, the female protagonist, is fully aware of this reality that is happening around her. Kishenbhai uses her as an enslaved person. He

indeed gives her opportunities in films, but at the same time, he does not hesitate to ask her to share a bed with his friends. He considers her as his property and uses her as an asset to receive more films. Her body is treated like commodities.

Like Asha Rani, another female who is a victim of patriarchy is Malini. She is a Gazal singer. But after marriage, she has to stop singing because she has signed a contract that she will look after her family after marriage. Therefore, she finds herself helpless after marrying Akshay. She is depicted as a wife, homemaker, and a silent sufferer who is trapped in social conditions. The novel has shown successfully that women's lives are conditioned to societal norms. They are expected to follow the norms. Being a female Malini is unable to take a stand against all humiliation. Both Asharani and Malini live in such an atmosphere where they don't find any scope for their own. Malini is a complete victim of patriarchy. However, Asha Rani is defiant and makes her own strategy to survive in a patriarchal society. Asharani knows the truth of Indian Bollywood and accordingly uses men one after another to reach to the top position. As Vijayata Dhand rightly points out, "All her female protagonists are erotic, sexual and rebels in society, as they pursue their ambitions independently." (1167)

The novel comments on the futility of marriage. A woman is a passive sufferer in the institution of marriage. As the narrator writes, "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)

Aasha Rani has self awareness and knows what she needs to do for her survival. She is also aware of the fact that Kishenbhai is using her as a piece of sensual attraction. When Kishanbhai raises a finger on her character she reacts. Aasha Rani tells Kishan Bhai that "All of you are just the same, but wait I will show you all – beat you at your own game" (8) Other women, in addition to Aasha Rani, are also victims and sufferers in this patriarchal culture. One of them is Malini. She is a mother to Akshay's children and a homemaker. Though she was a good Gazal singer, she stopped singing as per the marriage contract. Apart from the man-woman relationship, the lesbian relationship between Asharani and Lionda is also shown. Their relationship is a kind of revolt against patriarchy and its rigid norms where women are treated like slaves.

Starry Nights took the literary world by storm for its frank portrayal of sex and exploitation. The novel is a faithful portrayal of the Mumbai film world, with all its glamour, deceits, and physical exploitation of women. The protagonist, Aasha Rani, on her road to stardom manipulates many men, right from the level of assistant producer to important underworld dons and industrialists. Thus, beating men at their own game is the strategy that Aasha Rani resorts to throughout the novel. (Ghai 677)

Asha Rani the ambitious modern woman uses every opportunity to reach to the top in the field of Bollywood. Her proposal to marry Akshay, who is already married and a father of two children, makes all readers think about the character of Asharani. She has become such a woman due to her aspirations to get a name and fame in the world of glamour that she can not think about other women. Her concern is only to earn name, money, and glamour. Her attempt is seen as a revolt against the set norms in the society. But when Akshay rejects the idea of marriage, she feels dejected. She takes an overdose of sleeping pills and dies. Her suicide attempt is her failure to face the trap where she finds herself at the end. It is the reality of contemporary women who struggle to find their own identity. As Jayant Parmar writes:

Her ladies do not believe in the shackles of marriage, especially when their independence is on the line. She exposes the pitiful truth of contemporary metropolitan women's existence, in which they are oppressed because of their gender. As a result, many seek sexual activity outside of marriage as a sense of liberation. She mocks Indian society's hypocrisy in allowing males who seek sexual freedom to do so. Women, on the other hand, are strongly exhorted to satisfy their sexual desires via their spouses. De's ladies defy the societal norm that a married lady may only have sexual satisfaction inside the confines of her marriage. (10)

De's females want to seek freedom. They want to explore new opportunities in their lives. They stand for the rebellion of those women who become victims of male domination. De has shown the ability of women to protest against male hegemony, which limits their existence. Her women break all set norms in the society. Marriage institutions remain as custody for females. Those who follow all the rules of the marriage institution are also harassed and humiliated, and those who break the norms are not accepted by the society. Do women suffer a lot? De reveals this reality in *Starry Nights* by depicting Asha Rani's struggle in the Bollywood field. Asha Rani understands that she is victimized by the male forces and decides to take revenge on them. She has aspirations of her own. She does not want to lose her battle with the patriarchy. She seduces males and wants to empower herself. Her strategy to win over men is her ability to

survive in the dominated world of males who oppress females. She is able to establish her identity in the field of Bollywood with her seductive look. She uses her body as a tool to defeat men. As Nisha Trivedi rightly examines that “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 (186).

Conclusion

Thus, Shobha De’s *Starry Nights* makes a serious inquiry into the issues of gender discrimination, man- woman relationship, and quest for identity etc. Her attempt is to show gender discrimination in male dominated society. She makes readers aware of the truth of how women suffer a lot due to patriarchy. They struggle to live a life of their own. They do not have their own choices. They need to sacrifice a lot to fulfill the requirements of their families. The stereotypes of Indian society have devalued the lives of women, and they remain silent sufferers. Therefore, the women in *Starry Nights* want freedom from all exploitation. Few of them, like Asharani, her mother, and Linda take a stand against the set norms. Asharani’s attempt is unforgettable, where she becomes a rebel, shatters all norms of marriage, and establishes sexual relationships outside marriage. De’s women dare to fight against the oppressive forces in the society. They try to search for their identity in a society where they are humiliated and marginalized. De unfolds the ugly reality in the field of Bollywood through her respective novels. The females are strugglers who try to find their identity as women in the male-dominated society.

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