

## Modernism, Eroticism and Sexuality: The Corrosion of Self in Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Night*

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### ABSTRACT

*The journey of woman becomes very interesting when we enter in the world of Shobha De who introduces the themes of eroticism, sexual perversion and sexuality in her novels. She uses all tools and strategies to depict the true self of modern woman in her quest for power, money, fame and glamour in the film and television industry. The interesting thing about this modern woman is her corrosion of self in her pursuit name, fame and money. Woman of Shobha De is at her best moving in the society freely puncturing conventional morality. She is no*

*longer a mere shadow of man but aspirant to do well in society. Woman of Shobha De is the product of modern technological advancement, growth of education and the changing social set up. Her perception about the contemporary reality makes her different from other Indian women novelists. Shobha De accumulated the knowledge about women and excelled herself as a journalist and magazine editor. She was closely associated with the world of Mumbai Cinema. Her woman revolts against . The Pakistani society is patriarchal, repressive, oppressive giving privileges to*

*men and its harsh treatment of women, justified in the name of cultural traditions and religion. In this society men are born with respect, dignity and worth whereas women are considered as salable commodities. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies.*

**Keywords:** Eroticism, Perversion, Sexuality, , Marginalization, Patriarchal, Repressive, Strategies, Perception, Corrosion, Domination

Shobha De is a voracious reader and an active journalist. She accumulated knowledge about Indian women before she conceived her modern women protagonists. Shobha De writes about the complexities of life of the people of Mumbai. Her main focus is on the elite of metropolis. She has faithfully depicted the harrowing lives of the middle class women who are over ambitious

and passionate about sex and glamour and in their journey suffer corrosion of self. She used the terminology of latest fashions and always used slang speech. She borrowed images and phrases from pop music, western style dances, trendy hairstyles, high heels mascara and Hollywood magazines. Each woman protagonist of Shobha De reacts against the male culture detesting the marginalization of women. All her women protagonists are erotic, sexual and rebels in society, as they pursue their ambitions independently. Shobha De raises a strong protest against the traditional mind set of male domination and patriarchal oppression. She presents the image of woman who is ultra-modern, revolutionary in outlook, progressive in ideas and a spirited fighter for rights and justice and the victim of corrosion of self. The quest of the heroine of Shobha is for love, sex, money and power. De's women are fired with their inordinate

ambitions with all their strength and confront and resist male domination. They are selfish and epicurean and only live for themselves. They desperately fight, revolt and desperately struggle in vain to shape their destiny. They do not believe in suffering submissively, they use all the means to achieve joy and success in life. They are given full freedom by the novelist to ride on the tide of success and glamour. They feel proud by selling their bodies to different customers at different terms. They play with the emotions and passions of man intentionally. In *Socialite Evenings*, for instance, the naked body of Nisha is viewed as it was an object of otherness. De's women struggle hard to turn the tide in their favour. They face hardships, exploitation and defeat at different stages in their life but they are not discouraged. Instead, they continue to challenge the patriarchal society. They fight against slavery, oppression and

exploitation. The women have broken all the barriers to assert themselves. Sheila Rani Khare observes,

. As a feminist novelist, she has marvelous understanding of the psyche of woman and therefore female dominates her novels. Women struggle hard in their lives and break patriarchal order, pretend against male dominance and at last come out in fixing colors in their quest (Rani Khare 43).

Shobha Dee is a modern feminist who ruthlessly destroy the old image of woman launching a crusade against woman subjugation. The novels of Shobha De deal with the new ideology of love, sex, marriage and family. Woman is no longer stuck in the kitchen or trapped in the marriage responsibilities as we in the fiction of R.K.

Narayan and Raja Rao. Shobha De's woman shatters conventional marital relationship to satisfy her natural urge in human relationship. De's women hate colonization of their body. Shobha De has portrayed her female characters, bold and assertive. Even then they do not escape from the syndrome of dilemma, confusion and inaction. Anjali in *Socialite Evenings* depicts the mind set of male chauvinism thus: "Men feel terribly threatened by self-sufficient women. They prefer girls like me dependent dolls. You should try it see how much more you can get out of him that way" (218).

*Socialite Evenings* (1988) created a sensation in the literary world. The novel ushered in a new era and turned out to be the best seller and soon Shobha De became an international celebrity. She was called D.H. Lawrence of India and a trend setter who excavated the inner turmoil of modern women resisting conventional morality and

patriarchy. Shobha De bulldozes all age old taboos presenting shocking sensual scenes in her novels. Paul W. Roberts says: "A good writer, enigmatic, straightforward, crude, erudite, girlish, wise (Roberts 2). Her Woman rejects heterosexuality and finds solace in woman to woman relationship. The major focus of Shobha De is on the exposure of exploitation of women. The strength of the novel is the themes of libidinal fantasies of working women of Mumbai, domestic violence, sexual oppression, rape and depression. Mumbai thrives on money culture like New York, the working middle class woman are trapped in the claustrophobic environment of the glamorous city. She points out that male hegemony is very destructive in using and abusing female body. Shobha De has depicted smug selfish husbands who use their wives not for love but for social respectability. She discusses the social and

legal issues concerning increasing rate of divorces and the futility of marriage in metropolis like Bombay. She voices that women are not inferior to men: For instance, she writes in her novel *Sisters*: "Women play for very high stakes and are driven by ambition, lust, greed and hate" (Shobha De 82)

Karuna is the main woman protagonist in *Socialite Evenings* who belongs to the middleclass family but soon enters into upper class to enjoy wealth and fame. The quest of Karuna is very bold and courageous. She has suffered a loveless marriage, an unhappy divorce, and a series of extramarital affairs. Karuna has experienced ill-treatment from her husband who considered her a mere object and subjected to his own will. Karuna hates old orthodox ideas about woman; she defies all traditional values and comments: "We were reduced to being marginal people.

Everything that mattered to us was trivialized (69). Karuna is used as an eye of the camera to visualize the world of pretension and deceit of Mumbai. Karuna depicts the destructing amnesia of the working-class women of Mumbai thus: "And I hate the poverty, this meager income forced on me. Perhaps I just wasn't cut out to be middle class" (241).

The suffering of Karuna symbolizes the polarity between activity and passivity. Karuna suffers deflation of self; she is disintegrated as the world is too cruel to her and her ambitions are too high in life. She uses a pack of lies to survive in harsh society of Mumbai.

Karuna belongs to an orthodox family. Karuna experiences disorientation of mind. The quest of Karuna is for sexual and materialistic pleasures of life. She feels suffocated as she fails to make her inroads in the film industry. She aspires to enter into

the Bollywood employing the strategies of lies and treachery. When she is a school girl, she tells lies to meet her classmate Charlie. She is the first girl in the school to wear stretch pants to look modern. *Socialite Evenings* is an exploration of the journey of Karuna who rises from a middle-class girl to a famous celebrity. At school, she was a “defiance took another turn. I wanted to be different because I wasn’t rich” (9). When she was a school girl she was a problem child. She wouldn’t go to school by train or by a double-decker bus. Her dressing habits were erotic: “I would try and attract attention by wearing my sash hispster style, hitching the hem of my dress higher than was allowed”(9). Her sisters were hard working and studious but she yelled: “ Fuck studies” (13). She had passion for the stars and actresses; Karuna adopted a strange attitude in her school life.

Shobha De in the very first chapter depicts the patriarchal oppression which alienated Karuna and forced her to adopt an attitude of “intransigence” (12). She was sick of hearing the moralistic talk of her orthodox and strict father who urged her to “improve the mind” (12). She had to follow strict army rules: “Lights off at 10 P.M. Up at 5.30.No eating between meals. No “idle talk” over the telephone” (12). Her friend Charlie inspired her to become a model for advertisement agency breaking the norms of her family traditions. She has seen the first adult movie: *Splendour in the Grass*. Her photographs are published in a newspaper. They are published without her permission and without payment. The discovery of her photographs in a newspaper by her father earns her a tight slap. But it only intensifies her rebelliousness against her father. Karuna hates the middle class mentality of her parents. She didn’t want to be a frog of the

well and she hated boredom and shabbiness of her middleclass background. She confesses thus: “ But the rebelliousness I had cultivated in school now surface with vengeance. The ads kept appearing again and again and again –but the slaps stopped” (21). It is a chance that Karuna meets Anjali who is the wife of a wealthy playboy. Her journey begins when she meets Anjali and is stunned to see the life style of Anjali who is a New Woman of Shobha De. Karuna’s friendship with Anjali is disliked by her family “her mother had a psychic awareness of the unsuitability of their friendship” (12). She revolts against her parents’ wishes. Karuna is spellbound by the magical personality of Anjali. Anjali is ultra-fashionable, bold and a socialite. She owns “French perfumes, Impala in silver grey and a fancy place in Malabar Hill. Anjali becomes a role model of Karuna as she also makes progress in fashion designing and

advertising. Karuna is sure that she can earn a lot of money by entering into the fashion world. But Anjali accuses Karuna of bitchiness and lechery, her insatiable appetite for sex. Karuna meets Anjali’s husband Abe who is womanish and an expert in seducing women Anjali warns Karuna of her husband discussing openly the sexual weakness of her husband who is a “bastard”.

I have lost all my girlfriends to Abe. The minute he meets them, he starts his seduction plans. It doesn’t take very long. One lunch, two drinks- and boom- they’re in bed. I don’t want to lose you (41).

Like Dr Faustus, she is greedy and passionate to enjoy money and freedom. She didn’t like the strict attitude of her father who ruled the family like a military officer: “We never sat in Father’s lap. Not did we

dare to even tap him to attract attention. In fact, we rarely addressed him directly -it was always through mother” (41). Karuna’s approach to life is epicurean and materialistic. So she freely indulges in the fashionable world of modern life introduced to her by Anjali, the middle-aged prominent socialite. Karuna’s entry in the glamorous world of modeling and friendship with her boy friend Bunty depicts her determination to puncture the conventional morality. Shobha Dee has described two important episodes in Karuna’s life taking her in a new phase of life. First she dates with the New Delhi ad film maker in London. Karuna is highly thrilled to see the western society in London. Karuna had a boyfriend during college days. She met Bunty” a few weeks before she met Anjali” (64). Karuna later on married him” in a mad rush” (64). Shobha De has vividly described all the circumstances that led to her hasty marriage

with Bunty. He was the son of a rich parents as she says: “He was pleasant. But bland (65).

Shobha De has described the gradual disintegration of the married life of Karuna beginning with Chapter Seven when she starts living in a fantasy world. Ironically she was reading Camus, Jung and Freud in those days. She was feeling bored and buried herself most of the time in her room reading books and newspapers. There was no understanding between her and Bunty. She started feeling guilty she married “the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time.” Karuna found her husband an average Indian husband,” unexciting, uninspiring, untutored”. She felt that “the social life that went with the marriage was worse” (95). Karuna feels that she is a marginalized creature: “We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized... roof over



our head and four square meals a day (69). Karuna is not “the toy of man, his rattle,” which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (12). She is treated as a commodity. Karuna’s husband treats her as matter, a mere object subjected to his own will. Karuna undermines male superiority. She loathes her husband’s dwelling in “post-mortems” (186) She falls in love with Anjali’s husband and makes an open declaration: “I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him in Venice. There is a good chance “” (186). Karuna is not comfortable with her husband as there is no intimacy between them. Karuna is very critical and uses derogatory remarks calling him “Black Label” Karuna soon is fed up with the boring life with Bunty and divorces him for she feels guilty. “I put my face in my hands and wept: for innocents like me, like Bunty, or the dreams we all weave”

(52). Karuna is fed up with her husband’s compulsive socializing. She hates him, his horrible safari suits, and his habit of chewing the gum in a mechanical manner. He is a boring person, always reading newspapers. Karuna lives in her dreams and fantasies. Karuna is not “the toy of man, his rattle,” which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (12). Karuna soon accepts the reality and continues her journey of sexual promiscuity. She longs for a stable and happy married life as he observes: “I was really looking forward to a proper married life with a proper husband and a proper home. May be it’s not in my horoscope “(153). She thinks sexuality is the only tool which can help her to thrive in a harsh society of Mumbai. She becomes a stage actress and meets Girish, a film producer. They share a comfortable relationship and when Girish sends a marriage proposal

through his son, Kunal. Karuna has very low opinion about marriage and her past experiences about married life had been traumatic. So she rejects the marriage proposal which could give her love and security. She feels “confused and happy at the same time” (270). Again she starts questioning herself “was this what I was looking for? (270).

Shobha De believes that marriage gives security against economic and sexual aggression” (7). Karuna sums up the lot of all her friends, “We were an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left”(72). She creates “a liberated –woman fantasy persona for myself – passively and secretly of course” (72). Karuna’s affair with Krish is a torrid affair which continued for three years. Karuna feels guilty and curses herself for her horrible past in a mood of desperation. She thinks her to be slut. She wants to take revenge on her husband for his

indifference and neglect. She is feeling sexually repressed so she turns to Krish for survival and sexual satisfaction. Simon de Beauvoir observes thus: “Adultery *is* woman’s sole defense against the domestic slavery in which she is bound” (9) and when a woman feels suffocated and confined in marriage and *is* “sexually unsatisfied, doomed to make crudeness, ‘condemned to male ugliness’, she finds consolation in a young lover” (55).

It is Anjali who drags Karuna into the flashy world of actors and directors, producers and the businessmen. One afternoon Anjali calls on Karuna to see a nympho starlet Nisha at Anjali's house. Karuna finds Nisha in her white sari and an enormous red bindi on her forehead. Anjali tells Karuna that Nisha's husband likes her white sari and a big tikka on her forehead. Nisha is presented as a “devi and a pros” in the novel by Shobha De. Nisha plays odd

roles in the movies. For Karuna Nisha is a 'whore' and has a diseased body. She is utterly vulgar and has a vile, obscene outfit. Anjali is also passing through a very bad period. She marries Abe who is an experienced rake with wild reputation. He exults in wild orgies of sex and has a passion for sex dolls. The journey of sex adventures doesn't give any peace of mind either to Karuna or to Anjali.

Shobha De published her *Starry Nights* in 1992 and it excited and provoked the critics and reviewers of Shobha De. Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his article, "Tender, Beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in *Starry Nights*," commented thus: "Shobha De in *Starry Nights* has graphically depicted the Bombay film world and how could Bollywood be complete without sex and fleshy pleasures" (200). Shobha De has projected the fast disintegration of human values in the glamorous world of Mumbai

cinema. Aasha Rani, Geetha Devi, Malini and Rita experience maltreatment and exploitation in film industry. *Starry Nights* took the literary world by storm for its frank portrayal of sex and sexploitation. Bombay cinema is known for glamour; it beckons many young girls, bubbling with ambition and lust for power and self. Young girls like Aasha Rani have to pass through the dark tunnels of sexploitation loneliness and disaster. Shobha De draws attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification.

The very birth of Aasha Rani was a bitter agony. In her childhood, she was deprived of parental love, and emotional security, Aasha Rani had to face starvation and poverty. Her mother pushes her into the act of making the blue films and this way her mother is responsible in selling her body in the market. The critical analysis of the text reveals that Shobha De has depicted the

hopes and aspirations of a modern young girl whose main motive is success, glamour and money. Aasha Rani, is nicknamed as “Sweetheart of the millions” but she breaks all sexual mores and social norms by her deviant behavior. Nothing controls her desire to live a life of her own. Her sexual encounters with different men point out her sexual aggression. She defeats men at their own game, and demolishes the mythical image of woman imposed by patriarchy. Aasha is a female gangster who uses all the sexual strategies to entrap men to expose them. Aasha Rani’s source of enjoyment are men and the game she enjoyed playing is love making. For her age is not a bar at all. Aasha is bold in her sexual scenes depicted in the *Starry Nights* (1991): “Look, remember, that scene in our movie- where the director cut to a bolt of lightning just when our lips were to meet? I’m like suffering from continuity problem. Could

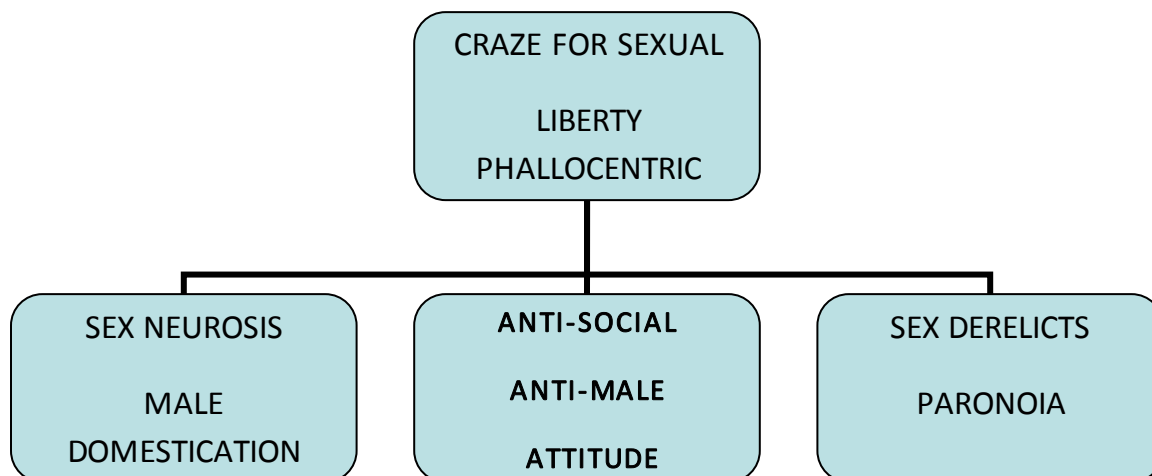
I.....that is... (29). Shobha De has focused on the theme of complete emancipation of woman. She projects the ideas of liberating woman through self-realization. The novel *Starry Nights* is a tale of a rural girl from Madras who seeks total liberation throwing all moral codes of patriarchy. The journey of Aasha Rani and her quest for total liberation is at once interesting and exciting, sensational and revolutionary. Sex and sensuality are a part of life and in order to accept life one has to affirm sensuality. It may mean erotic sex Aaasha and sensual love making as described between Mikki and her husband Binny Malhotra on the moonlit night in his place before their marriage. Aasha Rani doesn’t want to go to Mumbai but her mother forces her to become a money-making machine in her youth. Tears roll down the cheeks of Aasha Rani, when she leaves for Bombay. Like a caged bird, she is forced to perform in porno

session. Her mother cruelly struck her when she resisted. Before porno session, she helplessly cries, protests and repeatedly requests amma to save her life. Aasha is always haunted by her harrowing past.: “Amma please don’t. I am sacred. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers “ (53).

Aasha Rani’s quest begins when she encounters Kishenbhai in the first scene of the novel. She emerges as an impressive young girl with dark complexion hailing from Madras: “She had beautiful eyes.

Blacker than the moonless night sky. Innocent as Virgin’s. It was amazing” (Barua 7). Aasha Rani has to face many vicissitudes of life to build her name in the world of stardom. 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). Aasha Rani uses sex and bed as tools to take revenge from men. Her first victim is a married actor named Akshay Arora.. She enjoys sexual pleasures with him on the bed though she knows that he is a married man.

**STAGES FROM PROGRESSION TO REGRESSION OF KARUNA AND AASHA RANI OF SHOBHA DEE**



#### 5.4.2 DISINTEGRATION OF MIND AND SENSIBILITY OF AASHA RANI: CAUGHT IN THE TRAP OF LOVE, MONEY AND SEX

Aasha Rani's lesbian affair with Linda is one of the finest erotic strokes of Shobha De. In *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani is a revolt against the patriarchal traditional set up of our society. Aasha Rani revolts against the heterosexual relationship between man and woman. The fantasy world of heroines is shattered when their dreams do not conform to reality. Akshay is not convinced about the marriage idea at all as Ajay will kill him. Aasha proposes Akshay for marriage and convinces him that they will become Muslims since the laws in Islam allow bigamy laws. Akshay rejects the proposal saying that he wants to die a Hindu. Aasha is completely shattered as all her dreams and hopes are ruined. She

collapses on the bed as in desperation she takes an overdose of sleeping tablets. Aasha Rani's suicide attempt screams the head line of all the leading newspapers.

To conclude, the quest of Anjali and Aasha Rani is for the real mentality of men who dominate the society. Her quest for love, money, name and fame and sexuality lead to their corrosion of self. Certainly they explore the nature of male aggression and sexual oppression. Aasha Rani comes in contact with many rich people who belong to elite society of Mumbai, the producers, directors, financiers and super stars. She realizes that the world she had stepped in was very cruel. In *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*, Shobha De articulates bitter realities of the life of women like Anjal, Malini, Sudha and Aasha Rani through varied facets of feminism in keeping with contemporary feminist critical theories.

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