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Image of Lesbianism in Shobha De's *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession*

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Abstract

Shobha De is the most popular Indian Woman writer in English. Her novels are a slice of urban life. In her novels she realistically presents an intimate side of urban woman's life and also reveals her plight in the present day society. It is a fact that woman is victimized and subjugated by the male community everywhere. She has been the subordinate sex and has to conform to male standards. In most of her novels, Shobha De has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. She draws our attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification. Shobha De rejects compulsory heterosexuality and suggests woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to women relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. Reason being a woman can work up another woman better than a man; another reason can be the revolt of the women against the society and its norms which underrate women. Female homosexuality has several names namely lesbianism, sapphism, and tribadism.

Keywords: exploited, thematically, heterosexuality, lesbianism, homosexuality, sapphism, and tribadism.

Women novelists have made a significant contribution to the contemporary Indian writing in English. They have, in a number of ways, not only surpassed their male counterparts but also maintained a high standard of literary writing applauded not only by Indians but overseas readers as well. Not only did they experiment with the form of the novel to carry the burden of their peculiar experiences but also succeeded in making the genre a viable medium to cry out their agonies. It became a potent means in their hands to analyze, interrogate, and highlight the current problems in their society.

Shobha De is one of the most widely read contemporary and commercially successful women novelists of Indian Writing in English. Her novels mirrors the upper-class urban milieu, particularly that of women. De focuses on the elite, upper class women and brings to the fore their stresses and strains, as they face up to the challenges of transition of Indian society from tradition to modernity. Shobha De presents the picture of Indian women in a modern developing, changing and conflict torn Indian Urban society. Being fully aware about the

opposing pulls of tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western ways of living, between the desire of a woman for autonomy and her need for nurture, she reflects this conflict in her works in especially the lives of the upper class women. This article focuses on Image of Lesbianism in Shobha De's *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession*.

Shobha De was born in the Saraswat Brahmin family in Maharashtra on January 7, 1948. She got her graduation from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. After that she started journey of her career in different fields. She brought out three magazines *Stardust*, *Society and Celebrity* as a Journalist. She is a model. Columnist and freelance-writer is a few newspapers and magazines. She is mother of six children and she lives in a posh colony in Mumbai with her second husband Dilip De. She is in the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the tradition and moral values in society. De's women characters are daring and courageous with openly establish that reversal of roles are indeed possible for women in the present day society.

De's women are different from the ordinary traditional rural women. They belong to city-life and of high status. They have own way of living their life free from all kinds of clutches of patriarchal rules prevalent in the rural society. Narender Kumar Neb in her articles, "Shobha De: To Read or Not to Read" says,

De treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behaviour as a means of women's emancipation. But the reality is different and De's real concerns are rather otherwise. Her prime concern is to expose the futility and meaningless of such kind of pseudo feminist behavior. (163)

Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his article, "Tender, Beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in *Starry Nights*," claims: "Shobha De in *Starry Nights* has graphically depicted the Bombay film world and how could Bollywood be complete without sex and fleshy pleasures" (200). It is a mistake to think that Shobha De has concentrated only on sexual desires of Aasha Rani. It is the saga of a young girl, when circumstances compel her, who has confronted with the every sort of situation in order to become a successful star in the Bollywood.

The woman in Shobha De's novels is very much calculative about the mundane things and use 'sex' as means to become affluent and popular. Shivike Verma in his article, "The Novels of Shobha De: A Feminist Study" states:

Shobha De has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of women are sex-oriented and sex- centered in the male dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains of husband and society, reactionary and rebel, and 'new woman' and 'a liberated human being . (192)

Although the traditional Indian society controls women to express their opinions about sex, De's women have courage to raise their voice against the conventions of society. Bhaskar A. Shukla in his article, "Shobha De: The Writer and Feminism" remarks: "Shobha De's women are free about their sexual expression. They will not tolerate infidelity on her on the part of their husbands. All sexual taboos are broken by them with gusto" (211).

The word lesbianism is derived from the Greek word "Lesbos," a Greek island in the Aegean Sea which was the native place of Sappho, the 7th Century B.C. lyric poetess who addressed her love poems to women. In the *Kamasutra*, the famous classic of Hindu erotica, there is a clear mention of lesbianism. Today lesbianism is a universal phenomenon where women find sexual fulfillment among themselves. It has been increasing in the conservative Indian society despite the society's lack of recognition to this practice. Reason being a woman can work up another woman better than a man; whereas a man performs and after doing it he become indifferent to his female partner or show lack of care for her.

Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, and Shoba De have openly discussed free play of sex, homosexuality, and lesbianism in their novels. Ashok Kumar in "Women Empowerment through Indo-Anglian Literature" points out: "With the women's awakening and with the assertion of their rights they have also asserted their right to their bodies" (30). Arundhati Roy's, *The God of Small Things* registers the silencing of women and their victimization in the patriarchal society. Velutha, an untouchable, pays the penalty having fallen in love with a high-caste Christian woman, Ammu, who is a master of her body. Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* presents the mother-daughter relationship in a realistic manner. Virmati has no reservations about the game of sex before marriage with the married Prof. Harish, and later she becomes his second wife by refusing to be labelled as a victim of the world. Her novel, *A Married woman* deals with lesbianism which has gone beyond the limits of the Indian social code of conduct. Shoba De's *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani is a revolt against the patriarchal traditional set up of our society, which allows the sexual relationship of only the heterosexual kind. In man-woman relationship, it is usually the man who has an upper hand. Most women have no guts to voice or reacts to their partner's feeling of fulfillment in sexual pleasure. But through lesbianism woman gives a vibrant jolt and denounces man as unimportant even on the sexual front. De's *Strange Obsession* depicts the strange relationship of lesbianism between Amrita Aggarwal, a budding model and Meenakshi Iyengar, a lesbian. Through this novel, De questions the traditional institution of marriage and sanctity of normal sexual relationship between man and woman.

Most of the heroines depend upon their mothers for everything in the movie world. In De's *Starry Night*, the protagonist is a journalist and become friend of Aasha Rani who is at shooting for her first multi-starrer. Linda calls from 'Showbiz' magazine asking for an interview. Aasha responds that she should ask her mother for which Linda laughs at her. Aasha Rani is terribly impressed by Linda's casual smartness. Linda declares: "You are so young. So, beautiful and so

successful. Had I been a man I would have wanted to marry you” (Starry Nights 75). Aasha Rani is nervous and looks around for Amma. When asked by Aasha, Linda replies that she has been a film journalist for seven years. Aasha Rani is flattered and privileged by Linda’s interest in her. Amma hates Linda on sight but Aasha Rani dismisses the warnings. Linda tells stories about the interviews with Akshay. It is through these stories that Aasha Rani knows more and more about the industry.

The night Aasha Rani and Linda reach Manali, it is bitterly cold. Once outside, Linda suddenly grabs Aasha Rani, hugs her close and kisses her saying: “You are a real iceberg, yaar” (Starry Nights 78). There is no resistance left any more for Aasha. Aasha Rani’s entire body is floating and mind is adrift. In his article, Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his article, “Tender, beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in *Starry Nights*” criticizes lesbianism saying: “Aasha Rani’s lesbian affair may not be central to the novel and she cannot be called a lesbian, for she does not show much preference for it, yet it does have bearing on her character” (207). Then Linda says: “I’ve been dying for you all these months. And you are mine at last” (Starry Nights 80).

The lesbian relations of De’s women in order to get rid of their rigid and orthodox marital frame work. In a heterosexual relation the woman has to pay its price at her own cost. Since she has to destroy herself, her voice, intellect, and personal development, for a man’s need. De’s women are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit marriage for them is an insurance against social values. De suggest through her women characters in *Starry Night* and *Strange Obsession* that, whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously, flout morality in the name of their struggle for success in life, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. In her novels *Starry Night* and *Strange Obsession*, Shobha De is rejecting and deconstructing man-made image of women and an alternative female identify is created where a woman sometimes take the role of man and another takes the role of a ‘free woman.’ One might say that gender identities cannot be change on exchanged at will.

Aasha Rani’s Lesbian experience in *Starry Nights* is not just a variant sexual behavior but it has relevance to the heroine’s character. It is her short-lived abandon in the arms of another woman, Linda, fleshy warmth giving her emotional security, love, and certainly sexual pleasure, she is in her journalist friend Linda says to Aasha Rani, “Let me do to you what no man could have done This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our bodies” *Starry Nights* (117). In Linda’s arms Aasha Rani feels cozy and happy, even though initiative was not hers and after the act she admits superiority of lesbian pleasure to heterosexual “Yes, she thought, this is what it should be, tender, beautiful and erotic. In a way it could never be with a man” (Starry Nights 137).

As in Dubai with the Thai girls “she had experienced some of the greatest orgasms of her life”(*Starry Nights* 112). In the turbulent life of the heroine and

her many sexual escapades and many affairs the lesbian affair is something different. Something fulfilling, an emotional Oasis. Aasha Rani's lesbian affair may not be central to the novel and she cannot be called a lesbian, for she does not show much preference for it, yet it does have bearing on her character.

Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* is a strong case where we have specimens of a woman who is the victimizer and another who is the victim. The placement of woman as the other in the sense in which Simone de Beauvoir in his *The Second Sex* did it becomes irrelevant in this novel woman. "Is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other" (16).

Amrita, the protagonist is oppressed by the rule of Minx, a woman and she is oppressed by the sexual exploitation she is subjected to the woman who refashions herself in the novel is Minx who is presented as a materialistic, lusty, and liberated figure. Amrita, the young super-model is made to undergo a sickening experience by all the dominating and powerful Minx. It may be claimed that women are not flowers in the hands of men. But in the same breath one will also have to say that women are not flowers in the hands of their fellow women as well.

The novelist would like to establish that Amrita was a 'normal' woman who was never a lesbian unlike Minx who was proving herself to be one and redefining the roles women can take in the society. It may be argued that women have an identity of their own and it is very well within her power to act as they like maybe they have started to see themselves.

Minx continued to harass her and the next day morning she received a call from her. She had already laid a trap from which she was never going to escape so she was suffering from a crisis where one self in her wanted to enjoy life with Minx and another wanted to escape from her because Amrita failed to resist when Minx made sexual advances in fact at a certain stage she did enjoy sex with Minx. Therefore she was determined not to succumb again. But it was all a self betrayed as the next time also Amrita made a total surrender enjoying fully "The bath room sex" with Minx (*Strange Obsession* 156).

Amrita does not appreciate all this intense obsession, but Minx weaves her threatening spell and finally seduces Amrita in her own bedroom back in Delhi. She then takes Amrita back to Bombay. Where they live as 'man' and wife and Amrita's career enters superstardom there are lots of good lesbian sex scenes. Videotaped too by the Minx for her own private collection. Then who should come along to spoil this idyllic set-up Amrita's mother. Mother wants Amrita to have a normal arranged marriage to an NRI living in New York. Amrita first refuses and then sees that marriage will be her escape from Minx. They meet in a five star and he falls in love with the beauty, despite knowing of her alternative

lifestyle. Rakesh is very understanding and compassionate, he is not even scared of Minx. He tells her mother, who descends on Bombay and rescues Amrita.

A series of problems awaited Amrita from the day following her marriage. Her husband was found missing from the hotel room from where he had gone for a morning walk. Obviously it was the hand of Minx that worked behind the episode. Somehow she was able to trace him in Minx's room. Minx had larger design with her and the newlywed husband and wife were made to remain naked and was given instruction to have sex with each other openly. They had no way other than obliging. Minx did not stop there. She even wanted to burn them to death and kill herself in the process. Somehow Rakesh saved her from the engulfed flames but both Minx and he were admitted to the hospital with serious burn injuries.

It was at this stage that Mr. Iyengar stepped he was able to convince Amrita told about him were concocted ones. He also assured her that she would be free from all kinds of torments in future for he had ensured that all the photographs and other things which were damaging for Amrita were destroyed. Amrita had a sigh of relief. She felt that she was safe and protected from the death of Minx the news appeared in a newspaper, the announcement wanted no one to offer any condolences. Amrita had a feeling of free at last.

Simone de Beauvoir's explained in two types of categories: The first category is masculine who imitates man. The second category is feminine who is afraid of male Simone is of the opinion that female who are maltreated neglected by the society usually performing the active role. In order to compensate her inferiority she adds virile qualities in her mode of behavior. Minx comes to the category of masculine lesbian. Who is her mysterious relationship with Amrita performs the active role. She appears to be absolute invert who wants to possess Amrita completely. She cannot tolerate Amrita's relation with Rover. He has not only been beaten but also been scared of death by the man of Minx. In her relationship she is governed by the anti-social force of her characteristics instinct named as Id, which has turned her attitude into sadism. Id, the source of all our passions instinct and habits, strives continually to gratify them.

Amrita's relation with Minx is based on the pleasure principle only. Though Amrita's superego forbids her to indulge in this relation, she is consciously aware of her critical position made by Minx with all her consciousness Amrita protests. "I'm not going to spent the rest of my life being controlled by a pervert. And forget it I won't come back to Bombay with you. Neither will I stay in your home – what nerve!" (Strange Obsession 118).

The presence of lesbianism in De's novel is a part of the new rebellious women who wants an equal footing with man. What Linda and Aasha Rani, Minx and Amrita share are manifestations of the new woman who seeks fulfillment within her own sex. De's depiction of explicit sex between women are a truthful picture of the new reality which is coming up fast in the modern world and its

increasingly independent women folk who are throwing challenges to men in almost every spheres of human in lesbian activities. De's women will no longer tolerate sexual sualtertnity. Lesbianism have completely independent of man. Independence means being able to take care of one's own need in a healthy manner. Without a man the image of lesbian Independence is learning to pleasure their self. It can be very empowering for a woman. Shobha De's women's vision and they see the clear light of the day with the realization and discovery of their authentic female self.

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