

EXQUISITENESS AS A WEAPON AGAINST ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE:

IN SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In a patriarchal male-dominated society it is usually the man who exercises all power and it is under his guidance and directions that a woman is expected to act and follow. But today's modern women as described by Shobha De in her novels, are well aware of the fact that it's a man's world and he is more powerful because he is male since a long time. But they also knew that this powerful creature (man) has also a weakness and that is woman. Therefore, for their survival and making herself economically powerful, women have learned the art of using their exquisiteness as their weapon. From ancient time women are considered as inferior and since they are oppressed from birth. The present article describes the protagonists of Shobha De who learn the weakness of men to redeem to their own advantage. They are cunning, coquettish, and demanding. These women are selfish and narcissistic as they use their beauty to attain economic power.

KEYWORDS: Economic Dependence, Exquisiteness, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Economic Independence which is a manifestation of financial power can work effectively to enable woman to counter the oppression at various levels and forms as it is the most significant component and the most powerful tool for woman in her incessant struggle against patriarchy and her march towards self-actualization. Without equal share in power, woman cannot come on a par with man so she challenges the oppressive power structures which deny her power and thus reduce her to the secondary status. Simone de Beauvoir states that men have assumed the status of the transcendent subject, women have been relegated to the status of the immanent other. This distinction between man as Subject and woman as other is the key to Beauvoir's understanding of domination or oppression. The liberal feminists conceptualize power as a resource; a positive thing which, is unequally distributed between man and woman. Susan Moller Okin, in her work *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989), brings out the unequal division of critical social goods including power within the family. Marilyn Frye is of the view that total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. As such, one possible way for woman to resist the prevailing power structures is to deny the males access to her body, emotional support, domestic labour and so forth. She seems to subvert the patriarchal structure completely when she calls upon women to do exactly opposite of what they have been told by the patriarchal norms. All these theories establish that without equal share in power, woman cannot come on a par with man and thus challenge the oppressive power structures which deny her power and thus reduce her to the secondary status.

Shobha De's concern with the different aspects of woman's life makes her portray a variety of women and it is this portrayal of women that brings out the different ways the women are subjected to male hegemony. In most of her novels, she has focused on new women who have expressed their discontent with their inferior status and strived for equality with men. They protested and agitated for equal fundamental rights. This unrest became known as the women question. Almost all her female protagonists understand the significance of power, the power to control and direct the male

psyche as they have done till now. At the same time they are very well aware of the economic aspect of their power game. Thus, the writers like Shobha De, have stressed greater importance to the economic independence of their female characters in their fiction. As she states: “Yes, we know money is power. The person who controls the purse strings plays grand puppeteer. If the wife is wealthier, she’s the one who makes the husband beg for pocket-money” (*Surviving Men*, 18). The present article focuses on De’s women who either earn individually or control the finances of their husbands by their cleverness. De has given a new format of conflicts that stems from the desire to monitor money-matters.

DISCUSSIONS

In Shobha De’s novels, the standard equation of considering man powerful has often been radically altered and women with increased awareness of gender roles and gender identity have emerged as serious contenders of power politics. The female characters of Shobha De participate actively in this game of power to manipulate, transform, and create new traditions and archetypes for their redefinition.

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani has come from a small-town background to the tinsel world of Bombay, yet the question of moral values is not even thought of. For Aasha Rani the road of stardom has meant manipulating many a man right from the level of Assistant Producer to important underworld dons and industrialist. In the beginning of the novel we hear Aasha Rani telling Kishan Bhai, “All of you are just the same, but wait I will show you all – beat you at your own game” (8). Thus, beating men at their own game is the strategy that Aasha Rani resorts to throughout the novel. She has used her body as a bait to catch the attention of the film directors and producers. The first contact she and her mother find worth cultivating in Bombay is Kishan Bhai, a small producer of little consequence. He is the one who gives Aasha Rani the first required break in the film industry but not without extracting the cost from her body. But once Aasha Rani has acquired the status of a heroine, she is in no mood to continue as baby-jaan to Kishan Bhai. Then she met Amirchand (Sethji) who helped her getting big roles in film industry. Aasha Rani’s career swings into the fastest track in filmdom. Plus, the Sethji becomes her eternal mentor to closely take care of her rise and fall in the industry. Not content with her success in commercial cinema, Aasha Rani tries to make her entry into the world of art cinema also. The director of the art film, Suhas is then pleased by Aasho Rani. Hence, in less than seven years, Aasha Rani is able to crack the commercial film jackpot. Thus people like Kishan Bhai, Amirchand, and Suhas have proved beneficial to Aasha Rani in her professional life. This suggests that, Shobha De’s woman can calculate to what extent men are to be cultivated and when it is right time to drop them. They are aware that the path of power is from the road of manipulation be it with men or women or lesbian.

If Aasha Rani manipulated men Linda in the same novel manipulated woman for attaining success and Amrita in *Strange Obsession* uses lesbian Minx as her benefactor. This is revealed, as Linda does not hesitate to write against Aasha Rani when she comes back from New Zealand even though she shares physical intimacy with Aasha Rani. Like all other characters in the novel, she is also guided by professional self-interest and would not like human relationships to come in the way of achieving those interests. In De’s *Strange Obsession* Amrita goes close to lesbian Minx as Minx helps in developing her career. Minx also fulfills most of her needs—a good house and somebody taking care of her finances

Shobha De, challenges the traditional values of womanhood. The institution of marriage and family, work culture related to woman’s domestic and non-domestic duties are openly questioned and deconstructed. Mary Wollstonecraft argues that marriage is a contract based on property interests, and that while a woman has to depend on man for maintenance; marriage is a form of legal prostitution. She said wife and prostitute are equally oppressed and tries to work

out the connection between the two. Matrimony is projected as a negative institution for women. Marriage means additional duties on women and curtailing her independence, as she has to do child-bearing, child-rearing and other laborious tasks which had no prestige or required no intellect. De's protagonist scribbles in her planner, "Marriage is the ugliest compromise in the world." (*Small Betrayals*, 146) Therefore, marriage is not regarded as essential to their advancement by these women. De's women knew:

Men are cruel. Very cruel. There is no justice in this world. And no equality between men and women. Don't believe that a marriage alters that balance. Sometimes it only makes it worse. Powers lies with the purse—remembers that. Whoever controls that, controls the relationship (*Socialite Evenings*, 193).

So marriages are viewed as commercial affairs by De's women. Marriage for them is merely an insurance against social aloofness. This attitude is not exclusive to De only but world over; women fiction writers have developed strategies to project the images of women as proficient manipulators of the power game. The Canadian fiction writer Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), the Afro-American novelist Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Shashi Deshpande (*A Matter of Times*) and many others have highlighted the principles of female empowerment through inscriptions that emphasize the ideological and physical struggle of women for reclaiming and redefining the female self.

For De's women a husband has to be one who can be of some use to his wife. In *Sisters* Mikki needs someone who can help her anchor the sinking Hiralal Empire but Naveen, her fiancé, just does not fit into her picture of the husband she looks for. When Naveen fails to bolster the sagging Hiralal industries, Mikki breaks off her engagement with him and gradually accepts Binny Malhotra's entry into her life with the hope of reviving her father's companies. She knows that Binny Malhotra will make a smart husband and hence prove suitable for the role she has for him. Binny does save her father's industries but Mikki has to pay heavily for it. Within a week after their wedding Mikki realizes that she has placed herself at Binny's mercy. Binny does not even allow her to assist him in his business. He tells her: "Your job is to look beautiful... buy clothes, buy jewellery. Go to the beauty parlour. Play bridge, learn golf. Attend cooking class. But no questions" (*Sisters*, 116). When her husband Binny Malhotra stops her from pursuing her career after their marriage, Mikki feels hurt and humiliated. Shobha De mocks the attitudes of even the so called educated and sophisticated men who fail to look into the hearts of women. Most of the men fail to go beyond the boundaries of beauty, thereby debasing women to the position of mere celluloid dolls. Sans money, sans power and all other valuable possession, Mikki feels like canary in a gilded cage. Mikki's continual protest with Binny results from her innate desire for freedom. For Mikki, a materialistic pleasure without freedom of the self means nothing. But after Binny's sudden death in an accident, she takes time by the forelock and gets back on her job.

In *Socialite Evenings* Anjali marry to a homosexual Kumar for nothing but an exchange for "the Porche, emeralds, holiday in Biarritz shopping alone the Champs-Elysees, a villa in Ooty, parties every night, unlimited Champagne – and the choice to pick my own bed-mate but only discreetly" (182). The bargain is more worthwhile than what she would found in a proper married life with a proper husband and a proper home.

In *Snapshots* Reema loves Raju. Noor told about Raju and Reema's affair: "Raju was a God-fearing fellow. I used to meet him on the way to the badminton court. He was willing to wait for Reema, marry her. But she refused. Raju didn't have any money, not enough for Reema or her family" (*Snapshots*, 141-142). But being practical in her approach she marries a rich guy. Another woman Swati had married an eccentric millionaire, Juan Mendonca, who'd made his money by buying and selling mega corporations ranged from sugar, rubber, coffee, teak, to the recording industry. When Juan purposed Swati for marriage she accepted it without giving it a second opinion. In this way the desire for money, on the

one side, and the desire for social rank and title, on the other, obtain mutual satisfaction for marriage among the upper classes of society. Thus De's women marriage is degraded to a business transaction. In the same novel another character Aparna is a career oriented working woman yet she has to perform not only household duties along with her outside productive work but she has to bear bullying of her husband also.

Therefore today's women should do their efforts to improve their situation. When they will fight for their rights, nobody can stop their progress. Mary Wollstonecraft thinks that women are particularly vulnerable to inequality and exploitation because they are too timid and submissive, lay greater emphasis on compromise rather than confrontation, adept themselves according to men, and follow them. This happens because they are economically dependent on men. Wollstonecraft has a feminist protest against what society imposes on women. She said femininity is something imposed on us by men; and the very concept is full of contradictions. She said woman is at once protected and deprived, idolized and despised. Told that she is a goddess or a queen, but treated like a domestic servant or, if she is unlucky, a slave.

This is what Barbara Bergmann opines. He said, "Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine upheaval. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex" (Bergmann, 183). At this juncture, she doesn't need to fight for equality or celebrate Women's Day to prove that she is worthy enough. Rather she should be given more opportunities in diverse areas so that she is able to showcase her talent. She also needs a sensitive partner who is willing to share responsibilities around the house. It is essential for a woman to understand that by constantly comparing herself to a man, her ability to accomplish bigger goals in life will get weakened. She must realize that if she chooses to conquer the world, then nobody can stop her from doing so.

Money is De's concern. She observes: "The point of this piece is not whether money-talk should be the second language after one's mother tongue, but that women should damn well get down to it and understand what the money game is all about." (*Shooting from the Hip*, 104-05) She says that money matters are managed by women in many of the households. She has also heard a wife being referred to as the finance minister in the family. She regrets that women do not take major money decisions by themselves.

The essay "The Mirage of Womancipation" cause for a situation where "men will have to come to terms with woman power" (113). This, according to her is not the voice of naïve female optimism but the voice of reason and logic. As woman has been suppressed since time immemorial, she is in need of sympathy, encouragement, support, and inspiration for the full blossoming of her character. She believes that another alternative does not exist any longer. Women should no more be complacent and placid and they should start asserting themselves. Shobha De might deprecate attempts by earnest and enthusiastic researchers to find meanings in her work she had never intended (*Selective Memory*, 262-64), but she is nonetheless an important socio-cultural phenomenon, representing, especially through her popular fiction, the changing social mores of "middle India" (330): the middle class values of post-independent India, in which a sound education is prized above all else and the term professional refers only to a doctor or an engineer, have been replaced by a colder, harsher, and more openly focused search for money, the real "aphrodisiac" (380). Says De: "Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed, and exploited for the furtherance of overall, human development" (*Shooting from the Hip*, 112).

CONCLUSIONS

Finally one can conclude that today's women will no longer tolerate the secondary status. They are not limited to household duties of managing the house and rearing the children, but equally work outside the house in any field like men. Shobha De's works mark the beginning of a new and emerging consciousness among women about their status and deals with their concern about re-defining their selves. It interrogate the marginalization of a woman in a male dominated society

and inspires women to break out their cocoons and seek positive attributes such as power, competence, confidence and assertiveness, qualities that are considered to be the exclusive preserve of men. Shobha De through her novel characters explains that today's women will no longer tolerate patriarchy. These women can use their exquisiteness to become economically independent which leads to the path of self development.

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