



A STUDY OF FEMININE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SHOBHA DE'S SISTERS

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ABSTRACT

Shobha De's all novels begin with the titles beginning with 'S'. For the critics, the letter 'S' stands for sex. Shobha De does not allow her woman characters to treat sex as something tabooed or inhibited. One of the critics has commented as, "It is not the sex that is objected to, but the manipulation. The sex is included purely for titillation, as a necessary 'ingredient' to sell the books, much in the way a certain number of songs and dances are inserted into Hindi films. Many of her sex scenes can be dropped without any damage to the flow of the story." [Times Magazine. 1998] Shobha De recommends a mature attitude to sex. It is not like baby food: "I love sex, like I love food. It's same sort of hunger", [Snapshots. 1995: 134] says the protagonist Rashmi in Snapshots. What Shobha De detests is mechanical. It is loveless and routine sex. Sex for Shobha De's women is palpable. Their sex is pulsating and compelling reality. They do not hesitate to accept it as an important part of life. On the contrary, they think and talk about it boldly. They participate in it actively, turning upside down the traditional image of woman. For them, sex is shameful, hidden sin. Through her woman protagonists who talks openly about sex, Shobha De seems to herald the arrival of a new woman. These women do not lament for the existing sub-ordination and passivity of woman. They project their own passions onto others as a female power play in order to deconstruct the male ego. Shobha De attempts to challenge the conventional image of woman as a sex object. She tries to dismantle every kind of taboo on sex for woman. Women protagonists in her novels are more assertive as far as sex is concerned.

Shobha De, born in Maharashtra in 1948, emerged on the literary scene in 1989 with her best-seller *Socialite Evenings*. This novel was followed by *Starry Nights* (1991), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994) and *Snapshots* (1995). Shobha De voices her protest against the double standard, the society practices against women. There is one set of rule for boys and another for the girls. She was once asked whether she would not apply any kind of discrimination to her male and female children. She admitted that she does have two separate sets of rules for her boys and girls, "It has nothing to do with morality but more with safety. Today I feel worried if my girls were to go out for a late-night party because I have personally witnessed drunken driving on the road," She argued. She added, "Actually, it is far



easier to understand the girls as a parent than the boys. My two boys want to be tycoons overnight, and they divide people in two categories... winners and losers! So I have to gently stop in and tell them some hard facts.”[*Indian Express*. 1999]Shobha De’s novels are an attempt at discovering India through Indian eyes. Her novels deal with the challenges predicament, values and life-style of contemporary urban Indian women. De considers that her main concern in her novel is treatment of women’s questions. She once remarked, “I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag. I feel very strongly about the woman’s situation.” [*The Hindustan Times Magazine*. 12 Feb.: 3]

Sisters is considered as an explosive novel of Shobha De. It is known for its ‘Pacy narrative quality’ and for its ‘ostensibly intimate view of glitzy side’ of Bombay life. The novel deals with the psychic conflict in its liberated woman protagonist who is caught between a personal self and a societal self. The novel deals with the theme of women’s struggle for identity in the male-dominated society. Apart from this, the novel records the suffering of a woman in the patriarchal set up. In this set up, she is treated as an object. It is against the objectification of woman that the novelist raises her cry. In the novel of Shobha De entitled *Sisters*, we encounter a woman who struggles against constraints of being woman and finally succeeds in asserting her identity. Mikki Hiralal is the central character in this novel. She has to return to India from America after the untimely death of her parents in an air crash. She comes to Bombay to take charge of her father’s industries known as the Hiralal Industries. These Industries are on the verge of bankruptcy. The reasons for the virtual collapse of Hiralal Industries are still unknown to Mikki. According to a press version, it was the involvement of Mikki’s father in multi-core scandal and his financial debt to the tune of eighty crores. This resulted in the death of her father. She wanted to take hold of the industries of her father, which required a lot of attention.

Revival of industries was the main target of Mikki. For this, she was ready to undergo any trial and tribulations. Mikki is a representative modern woman of Shobha De who can shoulder any responsibility. Mikki does not fear the social constraints that are imposed upon a woman who dares undertake any untraditional task. She is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt. For this purpose, she requires to pool in a lot of finance. She is advised by Shanay, her cousin to borrow money from her fiancée Navin. Mikki approaches Navin with request to help her retrieve the industries. However, it takes her no time to realize that Navin is putty in his mother’s hands. Navin lacks self-respect. This shocks Mikki. *Sisters* shows how women are victims of male-passions. Seth Hiralal, a married man, had raped his watchman’s wife who died in forced abortion. He made Sapna pregnant. Her inside was damaged in abortion. Alisha is his daughter from his kept-lady Leelaben. Binny Malhotra has a mistress and children. But he marries Mikki and forces her to go for abortion. Otherwise, he will divorce her. Instead of giving independence and individuality, he wants to reduce her to a beautiful rubber-woman. Shobha De also exposes urban educated woman who takes man as a plaything. Alisha has sexual meeting with Navin, knowing him to be

engaged with Mikki once. Her action is an act of revenge towards her sister rather than any love. Her relationship for Dr. Kurien who attends on her in the hospital is purely physical as the doctor has his wife and children.

Shobha De takes up the issue of feminism. She also discusses the issue of woman's liberation in a very challenging and untraditional manner. She does not hesitate to deal with sex. The sex is called a "taboo subject". In the novel *Sisters*, we encounter a woman who struggles against constraints of being woman. Finally, she succeeds in asserting her identity Navin is the first person who comes in the life of Mikki. He comes very close to Mikki. Mikki "allowed him to hold her in his arms and kiss her." [63] But Mikki does not allow him to go any further. She cries, "stop it." [63] Then Navin stopped it and feigned as if he did not intend to do anything. Navin tells her that it was just a test of her virginity and that she has passed that test. Very soon, their engagement is formalized. After the engagement, Navin's mother used to call on every morning to Mikki's house. Irritated, Mikki made a complaint to Navin. But Navin just laughed it away saying, "Mother-in-law problems already." [63] For Mikki, his company for the whole life is neither good nor healthy for the job. Mikki began to dread her decision.

Thus, she decided to break off the engagement and the engagement is broken. Mikki is a very matured and decisive woman character of Shobha De. She is unlike Anjali who is sex-crazy. Mikki is very different woman after her father's death. She behaves more and more responsibly. She could be misled or misguided. It is Mikki who holds the key to decisions. Mikki is not an emotional, subdued or weak type of woman, like traditional Indian woman. She is an assertive, pragmatic and strong woman. Mikki challenges the usual orthodox vision of the society. She easily and without any sense of guilt breaks off her engagement with Navin. Mikki was a difficult girl to be pleased. Ramanbhai had tried his level best to trick her into testing him. But this could not be done. He even tried to blackmail her emotionally by addressing her as, "Beti." But Mikki was not moved. Ramanbhai discouraged her by saying that it would be impossible for her to undertake the revival of the industries because she was not a male. But Mikki did not listen to him. She was very confident of taking up new challenges. Mikki is a representative of new woman created by Shobha De. Shobha De thinks that women have to assert their independence in order to claim their identity in the society. Mikki has confidence, ambition, lust, greed and hate which her untraditional woman. On this ground, the novel has been called Indian in names and setting, and American in inspiration. Sarbani Sen comments: "Shobha De is producing a *desi* version of an American best-seller where the Indian ambience is merely an eroticizing on an unmistakably American cake." [Sen, Sarbani, 2000: 63]

For Ramanbhai, Mikki is the new woman who has armed herself to face the world, which is "full of sharks." [31] Mikki is very tactful in propitiating males. Shanay works very sincerely for Mikki not for getting her hand in marriage because he knew, "His love for his beautiful

cousin was doomed.”[42] Shanay worked to please Mikki who reposes full faith in the working of Shanay. Shanay brings her the report of the alleged murder of her father. Shobha De’s women trip through the male complacency and articulate their erotic sexual fantasies unhesitatingly and unmistakably. Shobha De achieves a unity in her vision as she shows Taarini, a middle-class Woman. She is too engaged in her extra-marital pursuits. She shocks Mikki with her straightforward approach towards life. Shobha De attempts to challenge the conventional male conception by showing a middle-class woman. Her attack on the taboo of sex for woman is aggressive and blatant. Mikki responds aggressively a phallocentric patriarchal society. Alisha is the girl who is overtly hostile and violent. Mikki’s is calculated assault on the malist culture. On the contrary, Alisha is a blind slog. Mikki is a typical woman character created by Shobha De. She represents Shobha De’s vision of how a woman ought to be. Mikki hardly appears to nurture any sentimentalism at the death of both her parents. In the beginning itself, she seems to prefer her wish and taste to the social convention. Her hatred for any show of sentimentalism is apparent to us. In the beginning itself, Shobha De makes her intentions. Both Alisha and Mikki refuse to sulk and appear subdued in order to look sober and domesticated. The death of their father, in Mikki’s case both the parents, does not seem to matter much to them as they want to get down to their business sooner than the society expects them to do. Mikki seems desperate to get back to America to resume her interrupted semester. On the contrary, Alisha appears determined to grab the huge fortune that her father has so unexpectedly left to her. Both these girls appear too much self-centered. They appear too much preoccupied to waste their time in mourning their father’s death. Shobha De invests them with the usual male feelings of ambition and purpose. The novelist sets on to open her novel in a frank manner. At the very outset, Shobha De is going to write from the point of view of these girls.

Shobha De exposes urban educated woman who takes man as play- things. Alisha has sexual meeting with Navin. She knows him to be engaged with Mikki once. Her action is an act of revenge towards her sister rather than any love. Her relationship for Dr. Kurien who attends on her in the hospital is purely physical as the doctor has his wife and children. All women characters of Shobha De Mikki, Alisha, Leelaben, Urmila and Sapana belong to the urban world. But they are unable to fight against being playthings or sex images. Shobha De fails to articulate woman’s anger against men. Women’s anger gives a disappointing message in the novel written after forty-five years of independence. When Amy provokes Mikki to assert her self-respect, the latter is unwilling to cross the boundary of a typical traditional Indian Woman. Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. The transformation of Mikki from a mere social butterfly to a mature woman and to a kindly mother figure is apparent when she turns her attention towards her estranged sister. Shobha De’s working class woman is stronger than educated and rich urban ones. Tarini is a middle-class working woman at Bhavana’s office. Tarini asserts her love for Shashi despite her husband and children. Her statement to Mikki is a bitter commentary on urban women. Another important aspect of Shobha De’s urban world is the disinteresting parent-child



relationship. Leelaben is sinking in the hospital. On the contrary, her daughter Alisha has suddenly become rich, is drinking and dancing with Navin in a nightclub. She has enough money to spend on her mother's treatment, but she has no time to share her pain. Dr. Kurien's well-meaning advice to Alisha is a testimony to what parents expect from their children. Alisha appears as an angry young woman. Her reaction to the news of Seth Hiralal's death survived by his only daughter, Mikki, shakes her terribly. Her own identity as another daughter of Seth Hiralal seems to be

The central event of the novel is the quest of Mikki to win her sister Alisha and Alisha's to be a rich woman. The novel ends on a happy note with the two sisters finally reconciled to each other: "The sunlight came pouring into the room through enormous bay windows of Mikki's and Alisha's beautiful home, bathing the two sisters in its golden glow. Mikki surrendered to its warm embrace as her fingers played tenderly with the silken tresses of her sister's hair, and she drifted off into a light sleep full of dreams the future shimmered tantalizingly before her half-closed eyes...and Mikki reached out her hand to touch it." [217] Mikki initiates the move to reconcile with her sister, Alisha. After many efforts, Alisha is won over. Mikki is a realist. She is not the kind of woman who contents to live a selfish and egotistic life. This nature of Mikki inspires her to go to attend the funeral of Binny Malhotra. The novel ends with an epilogue. This ending marks the poetic ending of sisters, leaving certain chords ringing in the readers' hearts and guessing. Both the sisters decide to depart to London. Their departure is a kind of salvation from the evils of corrupt business world. It is for a complete cure, change, and acceptance of life. Both the sisters want to have life partner or a sex partner and perhaps, it may be the later.

In the novels of Shobha De, woman becomes a symptom and symbol of the female's defiance of a male-regulated female sexuality. The novelist is so overtly defiant that she does not hesitate to describe the copulation of even those women who are moderate feminists in her novels. The description of sex in her novels is not intended at all to train. She uses sex to challenge the predominance of the males in the society and to create an awakening among the women regarding their exploitation at the hands of males. Marriage is an institution. In this institution, Shobha De does not believe. Through Marriage, women are pushed into a subordinate position. They are assigned the traditional roles. In the fictional world of Shobha De, marriage comes to be redefined. She denounces the concept of marriage which requires a woman to become sub-ordinate to man. This requires a woman to be pure, chaste and devoted to her husband. The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom. Shobha De's novels are realistic pictures of what is happening in the aristocratic society. She wants that women should not be considered inferior to men in so far as the discussion of sex is concerned. She was asked about the autobiographical elements in her novels. She believes that people seem to be more interested in knowing about the life of a woman. She frowns at man's habit to peep into the personal lives of the women. Men are astonished to find a woman taking openly about sex because men consider a discussion on sex as their privilege.



She is of the opinion that sex is the only instrument with which man can be beaten. Sex in Indian English Fiction is synonymous with Shobha De. Shobha De talks about sex so openly, boldly, frankly.

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