



## MAPPING FEMINISM AND PSEUDO FEMINISM IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE

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### ABSTRACT

*Shobha De is one of the most popular writers among many contemporary Indo- English novelists. Her novels have been read and acclaimed far and wide. De's fictional world marks the overwhelming presence of women. In almost all of her novels, a woman is the protagonist. Women's behavior, their thoughts and their responses in different situations forms the main concern of De's fictional works. In her novels, we come across a variety of women from extremely modern, assertive, young and liberated to the traditional Indian housewives. Her concentration on modern women's life and their immediate problems makes the presence of feminist perspective an essential aspect of her fiction. In spite of the mocking tone, casual attitude and depersonalized nature of her fiction, De does not seem to be indifferent to women's problems. Her concern for women's sufferings and their marginalization can be ascertained from the way she has arranged and structured her fictional discourse. The depiction of women's problems in her fiction is considered to be one of the major factors of De's popularity as a writer. This article reveals that De has not only concentrated on the presentation of a strange and startling world marking the emergence of recent trends in society but also shown her concern for the problems faced by contemporary high society women. The way she has presented women's life and behavior in her novels brings out her feminist learnings.*

**Keywords:** *Feminine, Sex, Marriage, Tradition, Patriarchal dominance*

### INTRODUCTION

The women in De's fictional world belong to the world of showbiz, opulence and romance. Their problems and concerns are different from those of the ordinary, traditional, middle class women. Being educated and wealthy, they have an easy access to new ways of life informing women's independence. The recent ideas about women's liberation have brought

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to them awareness about their marginalization and developed in intense desire for freedom. The ideas of newfound freedom attract them. The different nature of their life and concerns makes them involve in a different form of struggle. Unlike their traditional counterparts, these women do not find marriage and family as the source of ultimate happiness. Their views about life and women's freedom may seem insignificant and irrelevant to docile, submissive and traditional women. The complex nature of patriarchal hold that irritates and troubles these modern women can be gauged from Karuna's words, "... and as all of us in our little women's club agreed it wasn't the husbands who were the real villains....But how could we communicate anything at all to men who perpetually sat reading the business pages of the The Times of India while concentrated picking their noses." (SE 66)

These women seek equal treatment from men and their main concern is to make their presence felt. The subtle ways that render women's role insignificant become the major cause of these women's protest. The traditional system that ascribes control over money to husband is disliked by these women. Rejecting the male claim to provide financial security, women in De's fiction do not hesitate in adopting even those professions which are not considered good or suitable for women. They move in the world of showbiz and industrial struggles. None of these modern, educated and assertive women are economically dependent on men. In some cases even men have to seek financial support from women. It makes them aggressive as they believe, "Money can buy the best husband in the world." (Sisters 101)

Their protest against male hegemony takes a different form in matters related to sex. These women indulge in deviant sexual behavior to challenge the accepted notions of essential female nature and female sexuality. Their frank expressions about sexual drives reject the sexual morality essentially ordained for women. Their reference to the sex act in unambiguous terms shatters the traditional image of a woman that presents her as submissive, docile, calm and meek. An altogether changed picture of a woman emerges from the following words challenging traditionally accepted female sexual behavior: "We don't miss it. We don't find it dirty. Sex doesn't threaten us. I'm not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality and chastity. It's pathetic." (Snapshots 165)

For these women, sex no longer remains something sacred and they frequently change their bed partners. Almost all of the protagonists in De's novels experience sex with more than one person. They are lusty, wild and wandering women whose activities and thoughts show their belief that a radical change is necessary to make the present system congenial for women.

Instead of treating their sexuality as a burden or weakness, these women consider it an effective weapon in the power game of relationships. Sex no longer remains limited to the

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body rather it stands for power. Women explore the power potential of sex in man-woman relationship. A way of women's protest against the prevalent system can also be ascertained from their attitude towards women's traditional role in marriage, family and interpersonal relationships. Women in De's novels do not accept their traditional roles in marriage. They detest domestic chores. Extremely conscious of their changed role in family, they proclaim loudly, "We are not only housekeepers, after all." (*Sultry Days* 24)

These women do not want to continue 'playing wife and mother'. Women like Manju in *Sultry Days* express a shocking change in their attitude, "I didn't want kids at all." (118)

An interesting aspect of De's understanding of modern urban women's behavior is presented in their adoption of pseudo feminism. Unaware of the intense pain and humiliation of women's suppressed position in traditional family set-up, these women present strange logic and offer funny proposals. Their ideas mark the absence of a heartfelt, intense need for change. The frivolous nature of their opinions presents them as non-serious beings that treat their own interests in a casual way. De mocks at these women's thoughts. Their own attitude does not indicate the presence of some great impetus for rebellion against the present system.

De's presentation of these women's concerns, their behavior, their lifestyle and thoughts marks the subtle nature of her attack directed against the brand of feminism blindly followed by these women. In their misconceived notions these women adopt a business – like approach to human relationships. Their casual approach to the serious issues of life and the way they change and discard bed partners reveals the shallow nature of their understanding of women's problems. Instead of providing a wholesome form of life and becoming an ideal for the common women these women are projected to be sex dolls that easily fall prey to the designs of patriarchal man for satisfying his voyeuristic and erotic fantasies. These women's indulgence in unconventional and outrageous sexual practices ultimately reduces them to the level of sexual objects satisfying male gaze. These women indulge in exploring their sexual potential instead of seeking respectable companionship. To these women, husband is an awful word.

In order to reject the idea of male superiority De exposes the pseudo show of masculinity in man. The qualities of bravery, power – both physical and sexual – are traditionally attributed to man. Woman is considered to be weak, emotional and dependent on man. But in De's novels these ideas have been put upside down. Women characters, in her novels, show exemplary courage and strength in the times of crisis. They neither give up their efforts nor do they give in. Instead of being emotional they come out to be practical and pragmatic. The matter of providing financial security no longer remains the privilege of man.



In De's feminist understanding of life, marriage has a worthwhile place and can certainly play a positive role. De does not seem to reject the institution of marriage as such. Different women characters in her novels, often show disregard for marriage and opt for extramarital relations and indulge in outrageous behavior. But their disrespect for marital relations is the result of the oppressive and subordinating nature of this social institution. Marriage to them becomes a 'skin allergy' and an 'irritant' as it introduces certain curbs on their individual freedom and reduces them to mere objects and abject slaves. When the dreams of an ideal marriage are shattered these women feel frustrated and seem to reject it. These women keep on with their unhappy marriages for the sake of their comforts and indulge in mechanical relationships treating sex as the 'ticket to keep the marriage going'. Their drifting nature doesn't allow them to take marriage seriously. Sometimes their heightened sense of self-importance and their self-seeking nature destroys their marriage.

Through the presentation of varied experiences and opinions of different women, De brings out the pluralistic nature of feminist thought. It saves her perspective from being unitary, centralizing and totalitarian. The problems of all the women are not supposed to be the same. Therefore, not all pervasive, universal perspective can be perceived. Women's problems are socially, historically and culturally defined. There is a multiplicity of women's existence within the broad concept of woman. In De's novels, women in different social and cultural situations contest male hegemony in different ways. The feminist protest in this regards is projected in its different forms according to specific situations. For example, traditional women like the mothers of Karuna, Mikky and Maya, seem to seek adjustment and find satisfaction in financial security, social protection and socially accepted conjugal rights. But the modern women's feminist concerns reject sympathy, kindness and mere acceptance in established social set-up. They assert their position and desire to have the subject position. There is other woman like Meenakshi Iyengar who explores radical ways to reject male dominance. They want to be treated as normal women inspite of their unconventional and socially unaccepted sexual behavior. The new awareness among women has not only made them conscious about their rights but also has made them aggressive and assertive. There are no all pervasive common ideals. The women, no doubt, have thrown away the traditional restrictions to a large extent. They roam freely in society. They are free to opt for different professions and hold high positions. They no longer remain imprisoned in the four walls of home. But the tremendous change informing the new world order makes these achievements look significant. Now they aspire for freedom in all spheres of life. This makes them eager to have an identity of their own. They have high ambitions.

The novelist's concern is to show man's insensitive behavior towards women because of their treatment of women as female body only. Ironically, the modern, liberated women resent this attitude of men yet they repeatedly indulge in certain activities that facilitate their suppression

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and exploitation as female bodies. Under the influence of a misconceived notion of emancipation these women fail to respect their bodies. In their attempt to acquire the subject position, they flaunt their sexuality which facilitates their exploitation by men. Instead of emphasizing their qualities of head and heart, these women project their biological charms. De's concern here is to show that unless these women learn to respect their bodies and assert the appreciation of their qualities as a person they cannot acquire a respectable position in society. It requires a major change in women's perspective also.

De certainly does not agree with the women who indulge in promiscuous behavior in the name of women's liberation. De's rejection of these women's attitude and understanding of life can be observed in the ultimate failure of their views in getting them peace or joy. Most of them either suffer or opt for a life of domesticity in the end of the novels. Some of them meet tragic death or vanish from the scene seeking shelter in marriage or rejoining their husbands. An important aspect of De's feminist concerns can be traced in the view that control over money is essential to provide a respectable place to women. De seems to advise these women, in the following words, "The very concept of the sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive. Rage can never replace understanding." (*Shooting from the Hip* 112)

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