



ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE IN WOMEN IN SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS

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Abstract

In Shobha De's fictional world, successful working women are no Utopian dreams. They live their lives as they please and take care of their mental health. The need for women to seek their identity is the message in her novels new women earn enough to sustain them. De's women break the general social rules that keep them under the supremacy of males. They are anxious to establish their separate, individual identity. They are not afraid to take up challenges to achieve their desired goals. They have realized the new reality of their right to equality with men. They need and use man as a ladder to wealth and status. The present article highlights De's women's economic independence as a bludgeon in their fight against patriarchy. woman is self-assured, aggressive, and self-reliant in every aspect of her character. She is extremely ambitious and does not rely on any man. She is well capable of dealing with her issues. She feels that it is practical only through the empowerment of women. She questions all norms and rules laid down by the male-dominated society. Shobha De, the Indian woman novelist, delineates most of her female characters based on empowerment and liberation. In this way, Shobha De's Sultry Days, defending economic status is the main focus of this paper.

Keywords: Professional Women, Economic Power, Empowerment, Self-identity, etc.

Introduction

Shobha De's novels represent the new Indian woman's voice. A 'New woman' is in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. The need for women to seek their identity is the message in her novels. Economic Independence forms the most significant component and the most powerful tool for women in her incessant struggle against patriarchy and her march towards self-actualization. To shed dependence on man and has a room of her own, a woman must create a strong economic base for herself. The reason for being so emphatic and assertive for women's economic independence is that throughout the ages, it is her dependence on men that has reduced women to a state of pathetic wretchedness. The term economic independence is made of two words economic and independence. The word economic is derived from two Latin words 'oikou' and 'nomos' which taken together, means rule of household. It is obvious then that economic independence would refer to a condition where individual women and men have access to the full range of economic opportunities and resources, including employment, services, and sufficient disposable income so that they can shape their lives and can meet their own needs and those of their dependents. In her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de' Beauvoir rips apart the thin covering of the prevalent social order and installs a sense of rebellion and grit in woman to reject the male hegemony. The critic emphasizes women's equal share in power. She calls upon women to create their own symbolic order by saying that women can only free themselves by "thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men" (727).

Shobha De's works mark the beginning of a new and emerging consciousness among women about their status and deal with their concern about redefining their selves. It interrogates the marginalization of a woman in a male-dominated society and inspires women to break out of their cocoons and seek positive attributes such as power, competence, confidence, and assertiveness, qualities that are considered to be the exclusive preserve of men. The newly realized identity clothed the women in the shining armour of self-confidence and sharpened their faculty of analysis and examination with a broader vision. De points to the fact that these new women cannot succeed unless they are economically independent. Shobha De has brought in pertinently economic aspects of the power struggle. Eventually, she says, "Everything boils down to money that great leveler. There can be no talk of independence for



women, without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else”

Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandaya, Manju Kapoor, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, and other prominent Indian women writers, write about predicaments of women in the male-dominated society. Discussing various issues of women, is crucial in the formation and shaping of contemporary social awareness. The empowerment of women is an area, which is extensively discussed in the contemporary world. In India, especially women have been pushed to the fringes for generations. They have been denied their basic human rights and are being treated viciously. Despite innumerable amendments which are promulgated time and again to protect the rights of women by the Constitution, they are, however, victims of rape, torment, domestic abuse, brutality, honour killings, female foeticide, and a long list of other crimes. The law alone will not be able to change the situation. Only awareness, education, financial freedom, and, most importantly, a shift in the mindset may lead to true empowerment. Indian writers, particularly Indian female writers, have gone through challenges. Yet they are representing the state of women in literature, as well as their dreams and ambitions. Male writers have written on women's issues as well, but female writers write with a better understanding, highlighting women's exploitation and marginalization. Feminist literature plays a significant role in society. They address the oppression and suppression of women. Drastic changes are seen because of the attempts of these writers to highlight the status of women. Indian women of all classes are stepping out of their traditional positions and marching with their male counterparts down the path of progress. By questioning restrictions and humiliating social standards. They assert their individualism. The modern woman asserts that she is not a commodity for sale. Men are appreciated for their intelligence whereas women for their looks. Intelligent women are never acknowledged. They are seen as aggressive people and are oppressed.

De has identified flaws of women, particularly their emotional susceptibility, and is using her writings to offer them the way to empowerment. The female protagonist, Nisha in *Sultry Days* of Shobha De is a strong woman. She competes with her male counterparts for power and fame. She is keen to have authority and social status. Shobha De also seeks to give her female characters their own sense of self-identity in society by making them assertive and confident. The novel, *Sultry Days*, reveals how all characters are drawn to politics, and it also emphasises on Indian women's active participation in becoming team leaders, managers, and other professionals in the corporate world, who struggle and eventually succeed. De has taken a stand against gender discrimination in the workplace with this novel. She attempts to demonstrate that men and women have equal economic power. Another example is Bindiya, a corporate lady who has exuded self-assurance. She is an unconstrained Marwari woman who moved to Bombay five years ago from Calcutta. Bindiya is a traditional woman, who is well-qualified and well-versed. When she has stayed in Calcutta, she has married traditionally. However, her relocation to Bombay has transformed her dramatically, allowing her to adopt a new way of life that has allowed her to travel liberally. Bindiya's newfound freedom has led her to become the chairperson of a prestigious charitable organization that has raised money for people who have been suffering in a variety of ways, and she has quickly become a center of attraction.

Discussion

De's women are considered too modern and sophisticated, Westernized, and, above all, characterless. The protagonists of De's novels exhibit this trait in their characters. Shobha De's women face conservative middle-class families' grave objections when they opt for glamorous and challenging careers like modeling, acting, directing, journalism, designing, advertising, and even big business. To the common conservative middle-class Indian, this sort of high-flying lifestyle is very unwelcome and not in keeping with womanly behaviour and lifestyle. But they remain adamant and face such challenges boldly and move on their struggling path of challenging careers. De realistically presents in her fiction the models of different types of women before us. These women are strong in character and take bold decisions to survive in society.



De is one of the most popular contemporary Indian novelists in India. Her popularity is evident with many books published on her and her novels. In short, her books uphold a healthy understanding of man-woman relationships. Most of De's novels indicate the arrival and changes of new Indian women who are eager to fight rebelliously against the patriarchal social system. She also tries to give her women characters their own identity in society by making them bold and confident. The novel *Sultry Days* taken for the analyses of this paper shows how all the characters are centrally drawn towards politics and it also focuses on Indian women's active participation in becoming team leaders, managers, etc in the corporate world, who struggle and are finally successful professionals. Through this novel, De has greatly opposed gender discrimination in the workplace and has tried to show equal economic power to be shared by men and women. The novel *Sultry Days* opens with Nisha who meets Den@Dev in the college canteen with smelly beedis and ragged cloth. Others commented on Nisha's frowning face whereas Deb alone complimented it and this very soon made Nisha to get a friendship with him. She was fascinated to hear the story of God and soon got attracted to him. She was crazy about his peculiar attitudes, his intellectuals, his abilities and his talents in multi-skill. When Nisha learned through God that he was financially down and he lived an inharmonious and loveless life, she helped him by paying for his petty expenses like beedis, teas, gifts, etc. Even when God demanded money for expensive things to Nisha, she recalled how her father denied her in getting various collections of things like red shoes, dresses etc, and how she was very much disappointed. So, she had a concern as not to disappoint God and hence she fulfilled his need with great happiness. In fact, she was too fancied to help him financially and said, "I loved buying things for God. It gave me a sense of belonging" (SD, 22).

The words investment, savings, production, cost-efficiency, increasing returns, net output, and income tax somehow have distinct male connotations. Why? Aren't women equally business-minded and enterprising? When the housewife saves from the family budget, isn't that savings? When the housewife puts that money in a bank or in stocks and shares isn't that investment? When the woman goes to the market and haggles over a kilo of potatoes and cooks the same potatoes in several different ways over three days of the week, isn't that cost-efficiency? Simon Tata is the managing director of Lakme Ltd. The managing director of Bharat Radiators is a lady. Shobhna Bhartiya, of the Birla family, is the managing director of The Hindustan Times. Zarin Khan, ex-model and present interior decorator, owns a large interior decorating unit with a lady partner. Film star Asha Parekh manages the working of a hospital in the suburbs of Bombay. A large number of women in India in both the rural and urban areas run their small enterprises ranging from food processing units to tailoring firms. Some of them have come together to form their co-operatives. And yet, we feel that business is a word that is alien to a woman's vocabulary.

The portrait of Pramila in *Sultry Days* is another example of a challenging professional woman. Pramila is a Nagpur woman who had everything that a traditional woman could ask for—"a husband with a 'solid' job, security, lovely children, a moped of her own, and all the time in the world to pursue her interests" (*Sultry Days*, 160). But she is not a traditional woman; she is Shobha De's new woman. So she felt bored, suffocated, and frustrated in this environment. She had talent. This put ideas in her head and she set on the road of becoming an emancipated woman. She started writing poems and within a year she decided that Nagpur was not the place for her and her talents. Suddenly, without informing anyone she went to Bombay. There her poems were translated into English and she moved from success to success. But in this world of glamour, a stage comes when she overreaches herself and miscalculates Yashwantbhai, which results in a traumatic experience wherein her life is threatened and she is forced to go in hiding. However, later on, she fearlessly exposes Yashwantbhai.

The portrait of Swati in *Snapshots* is a further illustration of the new woman's self-confidence in exploring her potential. London-based Swati never feels any scruples about acting in dirty English films as long as she gets her money. She attends parties with rich gentlemen and high officials of the state. Swati reminds one of a news item widely covered by international media and London tabloids concerning an Indian woman Pamela Borders who had made her way up as a top influential woman through her sexual connections with mighty British politicians and other powerful shots of London society. Another character in the same novel Rashmi is also leading a liberated life on account of



economic considerations. She is also an actress. Though she is in an affair with a great movie director, she never forces him to give her any role in his movie or recommends her to some other director. She is self-dependent and through self-struggle and different hardships leading her life. She believes in a very straightforward narration of events and absolute open-heartedness. We don't find anything snobby in her narrative from a story point of view. The conventional people in India condemn her for her open arguments on sexual matters. Despite all the disparagements, her fiction has gotten wonderful reactions not only from various European countries but all over the world. Shobha De has become the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of women's freedom and liberation. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the stroke to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urges. These women are not hesitant to use sex as a calculated strategy to get social and financial benefits. Marriage for them is insurance against social values. Her novels can be thematically classified into three groups: firstly, *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts* are the novels that deal with themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, a quest for Identity, struggle for survival, and marginality. Secondly, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* (1992) moves around the life in film industry, and Bollywood and concentrates basically on lust and sex. All these women move violently for their overgenerous aspirations with all their strength in a male subjugated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the patriarchal order upside down. They get revenge, rebel and shape their fortune by living for themselves. They "don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the crest of joy and accomplishment. Packed with anticipation and ardor, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life. Their continuous struggle against slavery, subjugation and exploitation is disquieting.

Conclusion

Thus De's women characters search for independence makes them fiercely career-oriented unlike the traditional women who always rely on men for all kinds of moral and economic support. Almost every female character in De's novels desire for power of controlling money-matters enjoys power of controlling money- matters and battle to control power of money-matters. De's images of the new woman resemble the ones depicted in the day-to-day wall-posters in public streets. De's women work to make themselves economically independent. They are usually well established women with high profile careers.

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