



## Shobhaa De's Idea of Feminism: A New Dimension to Indian Feminist Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Several Indian women writers, by voicing the opinions and desires of Indian women, have played a pivotal role in Indian Feminist Literature. Shobhaa De, a well-known columnist and frank writer of any social issue, introduces a new way of writing (with the depiction of sex) for women in Indian English Literature. She, while portraying women in her fiction, tries to mirror or portray her own feminist mindset. Her woman, being termed as 'New Woman,' is a sexually liberated free thinker. This new woman, a non-believer in submissive suffering, rebels against the centuries-old traditional patriarchal norms of Indian society. She, with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, presents herself as an amalgamation of physical freedom, sexuality and stamina, striving for equal participation in pleasure, play, career, marriage, and family.

This paper, through a broad evaluation of her select novels, tries to explore De's whole-hearted protest against the good old image of women, unable to live and do things in their own ways.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Indian English Literature, New Woman, Sexuality, Shobhaa De, etc.

### Introduction

Taking its root from the Latin word 'Femina,' meaning woman, the term 'feminism,' on the ground of sexual equality, refers to a movement advocating for women's rights, status and power at par with men. To put it another way, it relates to the belief in equalizing women with men socially, economically, and politically. It is the efforts of women, seeking their independence and self-identity, turning into a revolution across the globe. Having been considered as a fight against women suppression, it recognizes sexual pleasure as a central part of a woman's life and does not believe in discouraging a woman, having no sense of guilt or regret, from knowing the way to achieve it.

The term 'feminism' seems to have so many different contested uses and meanings. Some writers, for example, by this term, refer to a specific political movement in the US and Europe while others, to the belief of injustices against women, though without any consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Feminism is an umbrella term for a variety of views related to injustices against women. Women, throughout most of Western history, were confined to the domestic sphere while men enjoyed public life. Women, in medieval Europe, did not have the right to their own property, to study, or to participate in public life. In France, for example, even at the end of the 19th century, women still had to mask their heads in public, and, in parts of Germany, husbands still enjoyed the right to sell their wives. Nay, even in the early 20th century, in Europe, they could neither cast their vote nor hold elective office. They were also prohibited from running a business without a male representative – her father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son.

Married women, without having the permission of their husbands, were not permitted to enjoy control over their kids. Moreover, they were deprived of education and barred from most professions. Such restrictions on women, in some parts of the globe, continue even today. Feminists disagree regarding both the nature of justice as well as that of sexism and also about the group being the primary focus of feminist efforts.

Both as an intellectual commitment and a political movement, feminism strives for justice for women and liberation from sexism in all forms. Moreover, there are various types of feminism. Feminists have a number of opinions about the nature and structure of sexism, and what exactly needs to be done about it. They may disagree regarding the meaning of being a man or a woman, and also about having its social and political implications to gender. Nonetheless, feminist inquiry, motivated and encouraged by the search for social justice, offers a wide range of viewpoints on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Feminist theory and politics are mainly concerned with the body, class and work, disability, the family, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism, reproduction, science, the self, sex work, and sexuality.

Some feminists, within academia, emphasize documenting gender inequality and changes in the social position and representation of women. Others, with their arguments, suggest that gender, and even sex, are social constructs. They prefer to investigate the formation of gender and sexuality, and also develop alternate models for studying social relations.

The essence of feminism, for some feminist scholars, appears to be broader than male and female relations. Some postulate their arguments for the need of doing away with and replacement of hierarchies in businesses and all government organizations with a decentralized ultra-democracy. However, some others place their arguments for the concept of having any central leader in any organization as a concept taken from the patriarchal family structure.

Feminism, broadly speaking, refers to a series of social, political movements, and perspectives that strive to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes (Brunel & Burkett, 2019). Feminism, largely originating in the West, is spanned across the world and is represented by several institutions committed and dedicated to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. But despite most feminists agreeing on some sense of 'rights,' necessary condition for the success of feminism, by which equal rights for women can be achieved, most may also argue for this being not sufficient. Latter's arguments suggest that women's oppression under male domination not only consists solely in depriving women of political and legal 'rights' but also extends into the structure of our society and the content of our culture, and permeates our consciousness (Barkty 63-82).

Susan James, in her effort to present a schematic account of feminism, says, "Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general categorization, there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political programme" (James 576).

Here, James seems to be referring to the concepts of 'oppression' and 'disadvantage' as stakeholders for more substantive details of injustice (both normative and descriptive), an issue of feminists' disagreement.

Shobhaa De, gradually finding the age-old traditional beliefs and morals annoying, fought spiritedly by giving her pen the shape of an open rebellion against them. She, unlike other women novelists writing through the eyes of man, by shifting her angle from man to woman, from the external to the internal, breaks the traditional world of Indian English fiction.

By losing weight and spending money in massage parlours, De's women attempt all to look glamorous and also rebuild their lost fortunes. Unlike conventional Indian women, they, in their efforts to look and act differently and attract people, love to fall in love with their appearances. These women, in the process, finding people falling head to heels in love with them, get immense pleasure though they, at the same time, display being least concerned about it. De, the novelist, by not portraying her women characters as love slaves or mere helpmates at home in her novels, tries to mirror her feminist mindset. Her works, with a broader evaluation, unmask her spirited protest against the good old image of women finding themselves unable to live and do things the way they want to. De has presented her fictional women as sexually liberated and free thinkers termed as 'New Woman,' much more physically active and athletically strong compared to their mothers. Bromley, in the journal *Feminist-New Style*, declares, "The new woman is a blend of physical freedom, sexuality and stamina with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, a woman who can combine pleasure, career and marriage. They are eager to participate in pleasure as they would do in play, work, etc" (Bromley, 1927).

## Review of Literature

Literature has greatly been influenced by philosophical thought, 'existentialism.' Literature reminds us of the social, political, religious, racial, and cultural influences of society. The review of works of several writers, various existentialist opinions, discusses the different ways adopted by the selected writer to intimate the plot and bring out the sensitivity of her characters.

Sarah Grimke in her book *“Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Conditions of Woman”* very rightly appreciates De’s spirit of disapproval in her fiction, right from the earliest to the recent one. Grimke’s feministic approach recognizes prejudices against the ideology and principles structured for women. Feminism, for a third-world woman, is a revolt symbolizing her fight to assert herself socially, economically, morally, and intellectually equal to her male counterpart (Grimke 10).

The book *“Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity”* by Alice Jardine discusses women, being a different sex, have to face a variety of problems. She observes,

“The putting into the discourse of ‘woman’ as the process diagnosed is intrinsic to modernity; indeed the valourization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory, that is historical, connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing and speaking” (Jardine 25).

Meera Bai K. in *“Tradition and Modernity: The Portrayal of Women by Women Writers”* observes that “Shobhaa De’s women are strugglers who fight towards goodness and a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart, mind, and spirit. It is a kind of untouched innocence and integrity” (Bai 35).

Geeta Barua in *“Rise and Fall of a Star: A Study of ‘Starry Nights’ The Fiction of Shobhaa De: Critical Studies”* presents a remarkable study of De’s *“Starry Nights.”* She wants to suggest that De’s women suffer because of flouting the traditional morality owing to their desperate search for success in life. Her women appear to be very good specimens openly establishing the fact that reversal of roles, for women is indeed possible in modern-day society (Barua 174-79). The multiple aspects of a woman’s mind and plight are dealt with in this book very effectively.

Sharad Srivastava in his work *“The New Woman in Indian English Fiction,”* through the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale and Shobhaa De, explores the growth of the new woman. He suggests that the ‘new woman’ is not merely an aggregate of certain personality traits to be analyzed through the methodology of social sciences. She is a being in her own right in the process of becoming. She searches for self-fulfillment by expressing herself in a milieu of support, kind consideration and tenderness. The new woman, in this sense, is different from the modern woman, primarily concerned with dominance and self-assertion (Srivastava 81-100).

Ningthoujam in *“Image of the New Woman in the Noels of Shobhaa De”* discusses De’s creation of a new class of women. These women are unique in getting to realizing that

“they too have their own individual likes and dislikes. They want their voice to be heard in society. Whether the voices of these women are received by attentive or deaf ears is not what matters. What indeed matters is that a new class of women has come up that is ready to take on the world to promote the women’s perspective” (Ningthoujam 47-77).

but De has not fully explored the various aspects of this new class of women.

Pushpinder Syal in her *“Powder, Puffs and Shobhaa De’s Fiction: The Novel as Consumer Product”* in *“Contemporary Indian Women Writers in English: A Feminist Perspective”* (1999) discusses the significant shades of existence and survival in a high-class Indian society. The women of Shobhaa De’s fiction use the tools of powder, puffs, and patches to survive in a harsh materialistic world.

In *“From Victim to Non-Victim: Socialite Evenings as a Version of Kunstlerroman” The Fiction of Shobhaa De: Critical Studies,”* Urbashi Barat acknowledges Shobhaa De as a trend-setter. De, according to her, becomes a representative of emphasizing different perceptions about woman’s freedom and liberation. De thinks of the extra-marital affairs of women as a blow to break the rigidity of traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most distinguished features of her feminism (Barat 119-28).

Kunjakka in the book *“Feminism and Indian Realities”* (2002) discusses feminism in the context of the Indian situation. The position of Indian women, throughout the ages, and the external influences that transformed their lifestyle have been discussed at length by the author.

Raghunath Gosh in his book *“Facets of Feminism: Studies on the Concept of Woman in Indian Tradition”* (2005) has, in terms of education, social, political, and legal rights of women, explored the tradition of India beginning from the Vedic period to modern times. He has made an endeavor to present the status of women in the eyes of contemporary thinkers such as Gandhiji, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore. Ghosh has also illuminated their interpretations of tradition about a woman.

## Discussion

De’s women, challenging the orthodoxy of social taboos, are symbols of rebellious modern Indian women. They, sharply contradicting the most Indian male writers considering sex as an unpleasant subjection to man’s desire to have offspring, present themselves differently from the sexually ignorant women of India. Challenging the traditional setup in Indian society, these women, in comparison to men, appear to be far more assertive, domineering and bold. Sujata, a prostitute in *“Sultry Days,”* finding pleasure in doing according to her mind, defines life on her own terms. Asha Rani, the central character and famous heroine of Bollywood in *“Starry Nights,”* in order to live with Akshay Arora, her fellow co-star, suddenly, at the peak of her career, decides to quit the films, and, getting her mother

dissuading her from doing it, argues, “Money, money, money. That’s all you think of. Well, I’m fed up being your money machine. I’ve done enough for everybody – you, Sudha and others – now I want to live for myself” (De 106).

The designing of a code of conduct, free from the existing gender rules and sexual constraints, by Asha Rani for herself clearly suggests that De’s women cannot be taken for granted being dutiful and self-sacrificing daughters for their parents. They, finding their self-interest at stake, will certainly revolt. They, in the process, may come across unapprehensive hurdles but they also very smartly, skillfully and tactfully break these hurdles and comfortably come out of them. De, through the portrayal of her female characters, clearly shows her intentions to expose the helplessness of the normal and spiritual breakdown of the Indian society. It is through her women that De, taking a thorough look at the age-old customs barring a woman from doing certain things of her choice, has shown her understanding of the human psyche.

Upper-class women in Indian urban society show no concern for the public. The traditional concept of love for the same person is supposed to be outdated. Taking an extra plunge into the hearts of the liberated upper-class women in contemporary Indian society, De tries to show her belief in breaking the traditional concepts of enjoying one’s life.

Sensuality, in order to accept life, needs affirmation as sex and sensuality are a part of life. To seek pleasure, a woman doesn’t always stick to faithfulness and love as a virtue. De has depicted her women in true colours – what they are, not what they should have been. Real pleasure, therefore, has different definitions for different women. It, to some women, may imply erotic sex while to some others, it, like between Mikky and her husband Binny Malhotra on a moonlit night in his palace before their marriage, maybe soft touch and sensual lovemaking. The concept of pleasure, for De’s women, envisages complete sexual freedom accompanied by economic freedom; they seek their uncontrolled passion in the form of pleasure. Social rules, particularly in India, if not legalizing, almost justifying a man having extramarital affairs, have always been harsh on women. Nay, the Indian society even doesn’t bother those men leaving their wives at home and enjoying with, by paying them in cash or kind, prostitutes or whores. No one cares for a lonely woman in her home waiting, nights after night, for her husband to come. The psychological condition of such a woman can better be understood. A woman, without the existence of a man in her life, in Indian society, is not considered to be complete. However, she is also barred from enjoying any sexual liaison with any man but her husband. Her sexual desire, not caring for her individual feeling, gets subordinated to the interest of society. Women in India, facing rigorous taboos of society, are forbidden to have, by breaking the rigid laws of matrimony, any sort of sexual liaisons. Nevertheless, enough broadminded women in De’s fiction, without caring for the matrimonial alliance of their partners, continue with their flings and affairs. Nay, they even confidently and reasonably justify their relationships. The relationship between Asha Rani and Akshay Arora in “Starry Nights” seems to be one of the best examples of it.

De’s women, not ready to abide by man-made superficial social rules, move around and seek pleasure, to overcome their mental fatigue, with anyone of their choice. A woman, generally, owing to the norms set by society, is not supposed to show her sexual appetite and present herself actively and boldly in sexual activities. Men in Indian society, generally, consider their women as commodities, make them dance to their tunes, mould them to the traditional servility, make them stand meekly and suffer emotionally. De’s women, however, by breaking the servility of these social norms, frame the culture of their own. De, because of her whole-hearted involvement in portraying modern upper-class cosmopolitan women in her fiction, doesn’t seem to be unrealistic. Her women, finding different ways of seeking pleasure, don’t hesitate in framing their own attitude and behaviour, varying from their male counterparts. Mostly urban women as they are, they are less interested in paying heed to morality and spirituality and want freedom from the traditional gender roles and sexual restraints established by patriarchy. They, rather, want to enjoy equal rights like men in every walk of life.

De’s women find sex contributing a lot in pleasuring them. De, the novelist, doesn’t consider sex to be a matter of despising or being afraid of. She, in “Snapshots,” speaking about the beauty of sex and its effects in the lives of men and women, says, “Sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three-letter word in India, is enough to celebrate” (De 3). A woman, in the modern urban world, trying to do anything of her likes, can go to any extent to derive pleasure. Asha Rani, the heartthrob of millions, the queen of Bollywood, to derive pleasure, uses ‘Bed’ as the most dreaded weapon in destroying men. Men become unable to forget her once they go to bed with her. She loves getting pleasure on the battlefield named bed. She is a pretty woman gangster in this battle. She has got expertise in judging her enemy’s qualities. She, after going to bed with a man, uses all the tricks to make him lose out and thus finds immense pleasure.

Trying to make the point of a woman to not spoil her life for being reduced to a lifeless body getting mentally tortured by her husband, De gives her woman a new dimension of life. She introduces her to another man capable of giving her pleasure by fulfilling her life with colours of joy. Maya, a very attractive young woman protagonist of “Second Thoughts,” after getting married to a bank executive Ranjan, comes to Bombay. Ranjan, under the assumption of providing four square meals is more than enough for a wife and that she should be grateful to her husband for doing this much to her, doesn’t take interest in Maya as a woman, never cares for her likings, and never



bothers for her gloominess. Not only these, but he also, when Maya makes advances to him in bed, snubs seeking more time for it.

Maya, with the entry of Nikhil, a college-going student and fourth-floor neighbour, experiences a new meaning to her life. Nikhil, a master in the art of captivating women, once praises Maya for looking fresh and beautiful in a blue sari. Maya gets so much enthralled by his praise that she starts putting on more and more blue coloured saris. The very presence of Nikhil makes her experience joy, coming from her heart. She, expecting his arrival anytime, starts taking care of her makeup. Getting bowled over their first encounter when a smiling Nikhil tries to look into her eyes, Maya says, "But Nikhil most definitely affected me and one part of me didn't 'approve.' This was ridiculous – a newly married woman daydreaming about a neighbour's young son" (De 45). This novel presents pangs of conscience giving way to the sublime urges of the soul. It regards extramarital affairs more understandingly and flexibly. A woman, getting pleasure out of an extramarital relationship, doesn't hesitate to enjoy it. Rather, she takes it to be a ventilator providing sustenance to a soul being suffocated in an unhappy surrounding.

Being very much aware of the other man's presence in her life, Maya doesn't want to forget the fact that accepting other man's friendship is a violation of social and moral code. However, she, after getting an opportunity, cannot resist her temptation. She, one day when her husband Ranjan is on a ten-day official tour, goes on an outing with Nikhil. She allows herself to be enjoyed and loves the company of Nikhil feeling the beauty and pleasure she was in search of. And, she admits it by saying, "I was ready to jump on Nikhil's motorbike and say 'goodbye' to my uninspiring life without the slightest regret. The choice was frighteningly mine" (De 241). Finally, De's smooth, gentle and painless depiction of the lovemaking scene between Maya and Nikhil can be said the heights of pleasure Maya experiences in her life. De's description of Nikhil coming to Maya's house to announce his birthday and embracing her without giving her any chance to react needs worth mention: "But Nikhil's mouth covered mine gently. His eyes were shut and his hands were in my untidy hair with the bouquet getting caught in the tangles" (De 374).

De's other novel, "Snapshots," depicting woman's needs, desires and pleasures, emphasizes sexual pleasure as a very important need of a woman. The very first sentence of the novel – Prem liked to make love in public places – reminds us of the impression of pleasure from a woman's viewpoint. De's women, here in this particular novel, speak about different aspects of love, sex and life. They, representing women's weakness for sex and sexual enjoyment in life, want to enjoy life and give in easily to sex. They experience immense pleasure in talking as well as participating in a sex-oriented conversation. They enjoy discussing only this very topic.

Swati, the protagonist and one of the seven women friends in the novel, loves her female friends' company or otherwise prefers being alone. However, she also loves sex and is a hard-core seeker of pleasure by using men. With their anger against the patriarchal society and relief of being alone in the absence of their men, these women feel free to enjoy their lives without any strings attached to them.

De, in this book, has portrayed many socially forbidden relationships being established just for the sake of pleasure. One of the very common relationships is the relationship of Reema with Randhir, her brother-in-law living in America. They had arranged their relationship, unknown to her husband, in such a way that whenever Randhir came to India he enjoyed full sexual pleasure with Reema. However, they didn't have love between them. They simply established this relationship to have pleasure. Reema herself confesses it to her friends and Randhir also criticizes her for being a typical Indian wife. De's description of their relationship suggests that it was meant for nothing else except pleasure. She writes, "Relax woman, I'm not the only man to do it to you surely. Reema shut her eyes and put her arms around Randhir. The feel of his smooth bareback under her fingers made her tingle all over and she felt her body unwinding gradually. She moved her lips, shyly at first, and then with a rhythm that was aggressive and insistent. She arched herself to receive him better, her breasts straining to make contact with the rough hairs on his chest. Soon the bodies were moving together perfectly synchronized and she could hear Randhir grunting in deep arousal as he drove himself harder, locked into a double embrace created by her arms and legs as she held him firmly, passionately to herself as if afraid of letting go" (De 158).

De's fiction presents sexual expressions and physical intimacy as a befitting background to deeply analyze the modern Indian society where a woman always finds herself standing at the receiving end. "Snapshot" makes the readers analyze a woman like Swati, commodifying her body for the sake of sexual autonomy, selling her body and giving pleasure to men. She, being used by men as an object of physical desire, represents hundreds of women in need of fame and quick success. A woman, seeking pleasure in her life, should shun her predicament, the conventional ideas of purity, morality, and chastity. By breaking the age-old custom of being committed to husbands only, women in "Snapshot" try to make themselves happy. Based on multiple partners, these women enjoy, have fun, and never feel ashamed of public.

Cosmopolitan Indian men, generally, are less interested in or rather indifferent to women's individuality, sensitivity and feelings. Women, facing the brunt of infidelity, and uncommitted relationships, start seeking pleasure outside their marriage. They, in search of personal freedom, express their anger by resorting to unethical acts like indulging in extramarital relationships. They, being careless to the self-appointed guardian of cultural values, prefer to live the life of their choice. Having complete control over their sexuality, they dangerously believe in outplaying men. Both men and women, despite their social and psychological constraints, want to experience pleasure from

within. Both husbands and wives, owing to the quarrel, boredom, and infidelity in their lives, seek peace and pleasure in romance, glamour, and sex outside their marriage. Sexual escapades for women in a boring relationship may be the only popular discourse for the sake of women's erotic pleasure. And, De's women suffer dissatisfaction and unhappiness being sexual slaves.

### Conclusion

De's women, thus, in contrast to the traditional Indian women adjusting their nature with their men, are independent and free from social and moral norms. They don't reject female sexuality. In their protest to the established views of human sexual behaviour, they, rather, display their different attitudes towards sex. They, by rejecting the conventional ideas of sexual morality, form a part of their challenge to the Indian patriarchal curbs on women's freedom. De's women, contradicting the myth of a woman meekly obeying her husband during the lovemaking course, show aggressiveness and sometimes, to destabilize the idea of male domination, turn sexually violent too. For them, the concept of pleasure demands complete sexual freedom having no care of fidelity. They love to explore the forbidden areas by the rigid norms of conventional society.

One may criticize Shobhaa De for commercializing women and expressing sex in much detail but one, at the same time, may also find De, in this process, trying to fight the cause of women because they, according to De, suffer marginalization in terms of sex too. The Indian husbands, to satisfy their sexual demands as per their needs, treat their women as slaves. Not only this, these husbands, in their lovemaking, even get cruel and rude to their women. These men, as portrayed by De, derive pleasure by torturing and beating women with hunters. De, concentrating on women's problems and giving them a new approach like Nayantara Sehgal, has presented her women as sexually liberated. In this way, De has tried to prove women's independence for seeking pleasure. A woman, like seeking her economic and marital independence, can, by discarding a man out of her life, find the alternatives for her pleasure. Pleasure, for a woman, may be the source of her happiness but man is not the only alternative for it.

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