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Financial Freedom of Women in Shobha De's Novels

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Abstract:

Today's women should become self-sufficient and economic independent and then system based on their dependence on men will shatter. 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. These new women earn enough to sustain them and stand by their own strength without any support from any man. De's women break the general social rules which keep them under the supremacy of males. They are anxious to establish their separate, individual identity. They are not happy to be recognized as the wives of Mr. so and so. They crave for their own space and achieve it in the face of all odds. 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 man. They need and use man as a ladder to wealth and status. The present article highlights De's women economic independence as a bludgeon in their fight against patriarchy.

Keywords: Economic Independence, New Woman, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Economic Independence forms the most significant component and the most powerful tool for woman in her incessant struggle against patriarchy and her march towards self-actualization. In order to shed dependence on man and has a room of her own, woman must create a strong economic base for herself. The reason for being so emphatic and assertive for woman's economic independence is that throughout the ages, it is her dependence on man that has reduced woman to the 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 woman and man have their own access to the full range of economic opportunities and resources, including employment, services, and sufficient disposable income, in order that they can shape their lives and can meet their own needs and those of their dependants. In her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de' Beauvoir rips apart the thin covering of the prevalent social order and instills a sense of rebellion and grit in woman to reject the male hegemony. The critic lays emphasis on woman'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). Obviously, the feminist thinkers have attached great significance to economic independence as it acts as a potent tool of empowering women. Shobha De's works mark the beginning of a new and emerging consciousness among women about their status and deals with their concern about redefining their selves. It interrogate the marginalization of a woman in a male dominated society and inspire 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. 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 aspect of 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” (*Shooting from the Hip*, 110).

DISCUSSION

De’s women are considered too modern and sophisticated, westernizes and, above all, characterless. The protagonists of De’s novels exhibit this trait in their characters. Shobha De’s women face conservative middle class family’s grave objection when they opted 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 highflying life-style is very unwelcome and not in keeping with womanly behaviour and life-style. 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.

First challenging career which De’s women are opted for is modeling. *Socialite Evenings*, the first novel of Shobha De, is about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna, from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Karuna hails from a conservative middle class family and plunges in the circle of Mumbai high society after her bureaucrat father’s posting in this glittering city. She leaves her middle class values and moral standards and embraces the high life of the rich upper class. She walks her way despite strong objections from her parents. Her modeling career which she opts for much against her father’s wishes is the first step she takes to become a part of the glamour world. Her meeting with Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy, makes Karuna’s entry into the high society easier.

Amrita in *Strange Obsession* is another challenging woman who comes from a noble and educated family, decided to search her lot in modeling and therefore she travels all alone from Delhi to more profession oriented Mumbai to pursue a career in modeling. In order to execute her long cherished desire, she settles down in Mumbai. She, like any other modern girl of Shobha De, is ambitious, conscious, and aware of her strength. She does not hesitate to capitalize on her blessings and believes in downing the world if possible. She dares to stay all alone in a city like Mumbai, far from home, to pursue her career as a model. In an alien city, Mumbai, she handles her affairs well, clinching some stunningly lucrative modeling assignments, and unsettling the already established models with her winning performance. She is ready to overcome any obstacles in embracing the fast life of this city. She is so sure of herself that when she lands herself in the company of the lesbian Minx, she does not regret her decision nor does she think of going back to her parents.

Another challenging career which Shobha De’s women have opted is journalism. In *Sultry Days*, Nisha is a journalist. Though she is a member of high class society, yet she has a very ordinary course of life wherein she tries to make her mark through sheer hard work and application. Although herself a member, yet she always remains at the periphery of the affluent and glamorous life. In other words, she is quite unlike the other women of Shobha

De who revel in the life of glamour and sex. Being a journalist, Nisha begins to discover her own commitments, commitment to a cause. She exposes Yashwantbhai, a leading politician, through her write ups and remains undeterred despite God's warnings to keep herself off by having anything to do with Yashwantbhai and his underworld connections. She is joined in her cause by her mother and her activist friend Pratimaben. Nisha's mother and Pratimaben are out to expose Yashwantbhai on the issue of his atrocities on Pramila with whom Yashwantbhai had an illicit relationship for some time. Thus Nisha works like a daring, committed, and active journalist and exposes politician Yashwantbhai. Another area of challenging profession is business run by today's women. When a woman says that she does not want a salaried job but wants to run her own business, the tendency is to laugh at her, or to discourage her. The words investment, savings, production, cost-efficiency, increasing returns, net output, and income tax somehow have distinct male connotations. Why? Aren't women equally businessminded 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 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 own small enterprises ranging from food processing units to tailoring firms. Some of them have come together to form their own co-operatives. And yet, we feel that business is a word which is alien to a woman's vocabulary. De's women also follow a completely opposite lifestyle. They show sufficient will power to challenge, defy, and retaliate whenever they get a feeling of being subdued by men. In *Sisters*, the two half sisters, Mallika Hiralal and Alisha Hiralal, are projected as highly ambitious and headstrong women who jump into the competitive world of high level business. They are neck deep in competition trying to outdo each other in business rivalry. They become assertive and highly independent. They are busy young women trying to carry on the legacy of their illustrious industrialist dead father. For these women life is a never-ending strife for perfection. They are hungry for best in every field. As the action of the novel unfolds, both these girls continue to indulge in their single-minded pursuit which is to lead a life of luxury, wealth, comfort, and pleasure, a perception quite alien to those women who seek a heavenly bliss in the domestic duties and prefer to revel in a spiritual illusion rather than chasing a material reality. In the beginning Alisha competes with Mikki in everything. Mikki's handling of her father's huge business empire after his death is remarkable. It is a tough job for a young fragile woman like her to become a business tycoon, but she accepts the challenge and succeeds. Shobha De herself told: "Mallika Hiralal was all set to make her own way into the corporate world as the undisputed queen of a cluster of companies her father had built from scratch" (*Sisters*, 31).

The protagonist Mallika Hiralal makes her stands very clear when she takes over the charge of Hiralal industries after her father's death. She takes over the intricacies of the business from her dead father and begins to plough her way through the business world difficulties. She intends to run the industries on her own terms. She does not need any advice of anybody, not even of Ramankaka who was a close confidant of her father who now offers his help in the management of her business. Aparna in *Snapshots* is another example of successful business woman. She is "a corporate woman, an Indian corporate woman. A businesswoman" (180), who can fend for herself at the time of need. Aparna is such a successful owner of an ad agency that when on the beach of Goa she tells Prem that they don't own that place, Prem

smiled and replied, “At the rate at which you’re going Aparna, you soon might. Your ambition, man, that’s something else. I like it. I like it. But it’s kind of scary” (*Snapshots*, 2). Aparna owns Maruti 1000 and the ad agency shed floated only a year ago, with two partners, is a small but smart outfit. The portrait of Swati in *Snapshots* is a further illustration of the new woman’s self-confidence in exploring her potentialities. London based Swati never feels any scruples to act in dirty English films as long as she gets her money. She attends party 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 actually 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 liberated life on account of economic consideration. She is also an actress. Though she is in affair with a great movie director, yet she never forces him for giving her any role in his movie or recommends her to some other director. She is selfdependent and through self-struggle and different hardships leading her life.

The portrait of Pramila in *Sultry Days* is another example of 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 miscalculated Yashwantbhai, which results in a traumatic experience wherein her life is threatened and she is forced to go in hiding. Though later on, she fearlessly exposes Yashwantbhai.

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 dayto- 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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