FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE

Postcolonial fiction of Shobha De is not an effort to reclaim lost treasures of tradition but to move ahead with the changed moods of society. Like Anita Desai, Shobha De is a novelist who has the gift of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology. She believes that a man’s personality can be judged in a true perspective only when one goes into his interior more than his exterior behaviour. Almost all her novels deal with the theme of man woman relationship and the theme of women’s struggle against male chauvinism. Her novel Socialite Evenings presents a picture of the institutions of family and marriage obtaining in the wealthy classes of the Indian society. Karuna, the protagonist of the novel had craved for independence and she was defiant of all authority. Indulging in introspection she discovers that snapping of family ties was traumatic and detrimental. She is pleased to be back within the fold of the family and wishes to remain there for a while. Without a husband she is at peace with herself, not willing to complicate her life by getting married again. Perhaps she was too selfish for marriage because marriage implicated sacrifices. While her mother continued to worry about her single status Karuna was not prepared to relinquish it.

Karuna, in Socialite Evenings is a prominent Bombay socialite. As the story unfolds, the reader sees the girl from middle-class metamorphose into a star. Vivacious, Ritu, who has developed flirting into a fine art, deserts her
second husband and prefers to live with a smuggler. Pitched against them are men - Abe, Varun, a high profile editor, Krish, the pretentious man, whose wife actively helps him in his extramarital affairs, and Girish, the art-film maker. The story revolves round these characters in a predictable way exposing sexual perversities and fake Sadhus.

She was born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra and did not remember much of her childhood except the strict vigilance of her father. Her mother who was preoccupied with domestic chores does not devote much time to know her daughter. Karuna’s life starts only when they migrate to Bombay. She meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy playboy. Karuna starts dreaming of a career in films and holidays abroad. When she enters college and gets married to Bunty, a rich businessman, the family accepts him because of his social status. He is not the right husband material, and the right choice, discovers Karuna. “He was just an average Indian husband-unexciting, uninspiring, untutored… She wasn’t looking for any stimulation either intellectually or emotionally” (65). She gets bored in reading books and crossword puzzles. Anjali suggests that she should try an affair as an antidote. Krish comes her way. Ritu her friend who had practised flirting as an art taught her about the rules laid down for adultery - “no calls on Sundays, no calls at home, letters to be destroyed immediately after reading…no presents” (171). She meets another friend who ridicules her for not having a car. She tells Karuna, “You mean after so many years of slavery
you haven’t earned a car yet?” (130). All the women in the novel are attractive, self-assured, conscious of merits and clever enough to hide their drawbacks. They are happy with wealth and pleasures which they could buy with money and the new-found freedom. Anjali leaves behind her teenage daughter under her husband’s care, allows her to take any man to bed, as long as she did it discreetly. Karuna does not want to have a baby, and seeks abortion when she gets pregnant, and later learns that she cannot conceive any more. In the process of establishing her identity, she divorces her husband and takes up journalism as her career. Ranbir, her colleague, is interesting enough to have fun but not to live with. Finally she ends up a loner who finds her evenings lonely in spite of her active participation in Socialite Evenings. The book has been reviewed as the lingering intimations of a paradox and as the liberated woman’s celebration of a new dawn, of total freedom. Karuna feels oppressed in spite of her freedom.

Shobha De declares:

I write because I like the feel of paper under my ball point pen.
Writing is pure sex. I like to see a blank sheet fill up. I like to think while my fingers move. I like the way words jump around inside my head impatiently like they can’t wait to pop out and be born. (Shooting from the hip xi)

An important form of feminist rebellion against the patriarchal structure is the attack on family which gets manifested in sexual freedom that is extra-
marital relationship. In *Socialite Evenings* the picture of man as husband is determined by the dictates of the feminist ideology. While in the novel Karuna goes round indulging in promiscuous sex, husbands are made to tolerate or ignore it. Even when a promiscuous wife divorces her husband, the rich husband settles a handsome alimony on her, thus enabling her to carry on her sexual amours uninterruptedly, or he takes the deviant wife back, after she has had her fill of sex with the man of her choice, without his asking any questions or suffering the jealousy pangs. In the case of the husband of the central character, Karuna, the husband is made to grovel at his wife’s feet to come back to him, in spite of her extra-marital relationship with his friend, Krish. He had pleaded with her to desist in her affair with Krish, but it is he who is made to beg her to be his wife again, after the divorce. Of course, he is unceremoniously rejected and even humiliated, because he had been mean in his dealings with her. He had cheated her of the money he had promised her while getting the divorce papers signed by her. In the husband-wife relationship, in which the wife has blatantly betrayed the trust of the husband, the wife fights her way up, professionally established herself in the highly competitive world of advertising, and becomes emotionally and financially independent while the husband is made totally helpless. Yet another instance of husband’s unconvincing generosity is Ritu’s husband’s action. Ritu, a flirt, first has an affair with a young ex-huckster-gigolo of Anjali and then lands herself in the hands of a shady, but extremely rich N.R.I., Gul, a builder and
lives as one of his concubines. She gets into heavy drinking, even drugs, puts on a huge weight, and everything seems to be over for her. Then like a fairy-tale resolution to her problems, her husband takes her back and everything becomes hunky-dory for her again. Such improbable situations militate against the credibility of the plot and make characters rather simplistic, one-dimensional marionettes. Anjali, a woman perpetually on heat, has a husband who is leading a promiscuous life and is not one bit bothered about her amorous activities. Ironically, it is she who divorces him, because he is taken up with other women openly and blatantly. The husband, Abe, is generous with the alimony.

Shobha De being essentially a feminist writer concentrates on women’s predicaments and gives a new approach to them. She is a novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a protest against male dominance. In her article, “A Protest against the Patriarchal in Shobha De’s Works”, Pushpa Lata, writes that Shobha De’s female protagonists are remarkable in challenging the patriarchal order. Also, the man-woman’s complementary image has been completely shattered in her novels. S.P. Swain is of the view that the novel Socialite Evenings was Shobha De’s first experimental attempt at the vamp ideology. The novelist presents the struggle of a woman against the male-dominated society. He is of the view that Shobha De’s vamp ideology of
feminism provides no redemption for the women who in their frantic struggle to escape the male domination meet with failure and are victimised in one way or the other. The novelist does not seem to provide viable solutions to the plight of ailing women (The Fiction of Shobha DeSocialite Evenings: A Feminist Study 136-137). Karuna in the novel *Socialite Evenings* discards the traditional role of a wife and fondly relishes the extra-marital relationship with Krish. Taking a lesson from her mentor, Anjali, she brazenly adopts a tough attitude towards her husband when he tries to prevent her from enjoying week long sexual orgy with Krish in Rome. Anjali, Karuna and Ritu are the proverbial succubi who reign supreme in first signs of being a vamp artist in *Socialite Evenings*, in which the troika of female characters symbolizes the absolute freedom of womankind from all types of patriarchal restraints (Kumar203). Karuna epitomizes the misery of a woman in India:

I felt like an indifferent boarder in the house, going through the motions of house-keeping and playing wife but the resentment and rebellion remained just under the surface, ready to break out at the smallest provocation. (69)

The novel, *Socialite Evenings* is also about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna, from gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Making a feminist approach, S.P. Swain analyses the novel which gives the picture of the marginalization of the Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Subhash Chandra discusses *Socialite Evenings* as a novel that
presents the institutions of family and marriage existing in the wealthy class of the Indian society. According to him, this portrayal is authentic, being an inside story, because the narrator (the writer) herself belongs to this class. Pramod Nayar, on the other hand, considers *Socialite Evenings* as a romantic tale, suffused with feminist traits. Urbashi Barat is of the view that the most ubiquitous and enduring theme in the novel is the search for identity and selfhood. She analyzes in detail *Socialite Evenings* as a version of Kunstlerroman. (*Feminist English Literature* 133-136)

Ravi says that Karuna has a quest to find about herself which springs from her expectations (160). For Inna Walter, *Socialite Evenings* is essentially a story of the modern New Woman, named Karuna who is independent in every way. It is an initiation tale from innocence to experience, in the style of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* and *Jasmine*. In his article on Shobha De, Chandra makes a comparative study of the image of man in their novels *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Socialite Evenings* respectively and concludes that in *Socialite Evenings*, the picture of man as husband is determined by the dictates of the feminist ideology (*The Fiction of Shobha De* 87).

*Socialite Evenings* deals with the marginalization of Indian woman at the hands of their husbands. Karuna’s marriage is a failure since it is loveless and joyless. There is no understanding between the husband and the wife. She feels that she has not married the right person. She boldly and defiantly encounters, for, she realizes “marriage is nothing to get excited or worried
about. It is just something to get used to” (68) and she gets used to this stereotyped social institution in the course of time. She detests the callous attitude of the husbands who often keep themselves busy in drab monotonous activities like reading the business page of The Times of India. Despite these laxities, a husband was above all, a sheltering tree, a rock to the wife. They were not wholly bad or evil and the wife as a woman was only a peripheral being. Karuna says:

We are reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was ‘you don’t really count, except in the context of my priorities’. It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over head and four square meals a day. (69)

In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the man who shouts, hurls abuses, bullies, reproaches, and criticises and it is the woman who listens, tolerates and remains passive. Shobha De’s women are quite different. Like Karuna they are liberated women who fight back, resist and make protest. Subaltern attitude of women finds expression in the deletion from their mind of all thoughts of feminine liberty and equality. It is interesting to observe that Sudhir Kumar places the novelist Anita Desai in the mirror category in the Indian fiction and Shobha De in the vamp category. While the female characters of Anita Desai display a new sensibility to protest against the
patriarchal order, the female characters of Shobha De demand total liberation from the male domination, a rewriting of female discourse and deconstruction of the binary opposites of culture (S Kumar 204-205).

Anjali resembles Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights*. Anjali throws off the conventional moral values and rises from her middle-class background to the upper-most rung of the society. She enacts a marriage of convenience with Abe, “an experienced rake with a wild reputation” (*Socialite Evenings* 12). Both of them revel in the orgiastic rituals. Her passion for sex is illimitable indeed as the novel bristles with her frequent sexual encounters. The range of her sexual exploits is bewildering from a die-hard rake Abe to an innocent, baby-faced Karan. Her scheming mother pushes her in the never-ending gluttony of blue film and then through sex in the crass-world of Bombay cinema. Aasha’s downfall begins as she rises in her career. Krish, the producer first exploits her physically, but later on finds himself in love with her. Meanwhile her mother, acting as her first-pimp, compels her to please big personalities of cinema in order to get good roles. Rejecting his love she falls in love with the top star of cinema Akshay Arora. Later in her life she realizes that it all began as an infatuation towards him. It was his top position in the industry, his aristocratic manners, high standard of living that swept her off her feet. She admits: “I feel like a villager in his presence” (*Starry Nights* 130).

Being a middle-class woman her strong desire is to become an ultra modern by emulating his life. Deprived of true love and sympathy, she seeks
shelter in his bosom. Akshay, a typical representative of the society, has no courage to take a bold step. His wife Malini, who has already given up her career as a ghazal singer is repulsive of sex and tries to get Aasha out of their life with the help of her friend Rita.

A meeting is arranged in Rita’s bungalow to humiliate Aasha. There Akshay’s wife rebukes her and curses her to die as a spinster. Aasha, confident of her love, makes her realize that she herself is responsible to break the bond between her and Akshay for she does not greet him properly when he comes back home and does not give proper celebration in the bed. Malini thinks, “Men are all the same animals, and we women such fools” (50).

Boredom and loneliness in life do not inspire Aasha to work hard in three shifts. She longs for a normal life and her heart craves for marriage and parenthood. That is why she rejects the offer of Abhijit who is attracted by her appealing personality. She asks him to find love in his family, his wife: “you are not making love to me. You are screwing my image - my screen image. Get out of here, Abhijit. Go back to your wife and make a man of yourself. I have my own life to lead” (97).

Obsessed with the thoughts of Akshay she catches him suddenly one day, begs an hour of him and even after his humiliation she gets the matter on once again between them. The feeling of victory of love makes her so crazy that she decides to leave her career to become his wife, the mother of his children. She is upset by her mother’s greediness. For the first time rebelling
against the over-powering mother she bursts out: “Money, money, money. That’s all you think of. Well, I’m fed up of being your money machine. I’ve done enough for everybody – you, Sudha and others – now, I want to live for myself and enjoy my life” (183-84). Since none of her plans work, the frustrated Aasha tries to commit suicide. As usual Akshay refuses all interviews and remains silent in every matter related to them. Betrayed by Akshay, Aasha reluctantly tries to find peace in her relationship with Abhijit who offers him a holiday in a distant land where nobody can disturb them. They leave for New Zealand but his father surprises them by meeting them at New Zealand airport. He offers a big sum of amount to Aasha for leaving his son. Aasha at once agrees because she was never in love with anyone except Akshay Arora. Partially banished from India, Aasha goes to Wellington. There, an admirer proposes marriage. Bored, troubled and confused, she accepts the offer and becomes Mrs. Jammy (Jay) Phillips. Far from the world of cinema, she leads a family life with a farmer. Her life fills with love; satisfied with her present state of life, she tries to forget the past. She does not want to even think of India. When in one and a half years, she becomes the mother of a beautiful girl child, she finds her life filled with every happiness of the world. To enjoy this important event of life, she decides that she will share the mutual trust and understanding – the most beautiful aspects of a mother-daughter relationship with Sasha, her daughter.
When Jay, her husband, proposes that she visits India with the child, she says: “Nothing doing, no way. I never want to go back. And please don’t give Amma the news. I want to protect Sasha from her. I want to bring her up with all the love in the world. I never want her to meet her grandmother, never” (130). On reaching India she finds herself in totally strange circumstances and feels a kind of responsibility towards her “Appa” (father) who is back home and is suffering from illness. She finds that Amma has lost her dictator’s image and totally depends upon the mercy of Sudha, her younger daughter, who has skilfully taken Aasha’s place in Bombay cinema. During her stay in Madras, Aasha receives an invitation as the chief guest for the Mahurat of a film from her old acquaintance Rita. She accepts the invitation and as she steps into a blaze of flash inside the studio, she feels as if she had never been away. Everything comes back to her - the peculiar atmosphere of the studio, people crowding around, trying to touch stars, get near them and smell them. She thinks she missed it all. It is only after such incidents that it strikes her how much of an alien she was in New Zealand. She had tried to adapt, adjust and accept. Now back in familiar territory she realizes how deluded she was.

Finally, she prefers to stay in India, especially in the film society. Jay cooperates and leaves for Wellington along with Sasha. He gives Aasha a chance to fulfil her wishes, her responsibilities and above all to have a feeling of working and doing something in her life – a feeling of achievement. Soon, Aasha realizes that five years have changed everything in the world including
Bombay cinema. She gets offers for the roles of mother or mother-in-law. The shock is unbearable to her and once again she is ready to have an adulterous relationship with the young producer Jojo for getting the main role. Meanwhile, she receives a call from Wellington from her daughter that Jay has an affair with her nanny. Confused and desperate, she feels shattered. “Whichever way one looked at”, she thinks, “there was always a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman” (157).

Afraid of failure and rejection she decides to find out the truth with Jay. On reaching Wellington she comes to know that her marriage is over. Once again she confronts the problem of existence and belongingness. She is vexed with her relatives and dejected with her life. These problems haunt her during her return journey. Her unpromising state of mind makes her land in London and finds a job. She comes into contact with Shonlai, a high class call girl of London’s political and upper class society. There she finds herself trapped in the web of Tamil terrorists.

Having escaped from the harsh realities of life, she returns to Madras, where she is welcomed by every member of her family. Her younger sister’s inability to establish herself as a star disturbs her. Appa’s faith in her gives her strength and courage to restart their old family film studio in Madras. Now she has existence, belongingness, and opportunity to do something creative in her life.
She has gained experience in her life and this gives her strength. Instead of escaping from her life’s responsibilities, or yielding to the problems, Aasha chooses the right way of struggling and surviving through it. She realizes that her roots are very deep in the soil of India, especially in Madras where she can grow. She realizes that the glittering world of cinema is ruthless and miserable and can shatter the moral values and innocence of any human being. Aasha survives and achieves success in the end, after undergoing various bitter experiences in her life.

Shobha De’s comment on her novel *Socialite Evenings* is quite revealing. Why *Socialite Evenings* generated so much heat, I now wonder. It was innocuously written – no explicit scenes. No foul language. Could it have been the theme itself? That a woman could walk out of a perfectly secure marriage out of boredom? Karuna the protagonist is not a bitch, if anything she is too sensible. But she is the one who recognised her marriage for what it is empty (N.P Singh 312).

*Starry Nights* is a blend of the mirror and the vamp approaches to feminism. Both approaches launch a frontal assault on society and its various male-dominated institutions. The vamp approach to feminism is at full play in the novel after Aasha Rani’s first surrender to Kishanbhai. Thereafter, Shobha De makes Aasha Rani embark upon a dazzling round of sexual encounters with her rather persistent references to the erotic zones and the private parts, and characteristics of the female body. With her satanic seductiveness and
boundless libidinal energy Aasha Rani breaks all sexual taboos with gusto. Once the repressed in her is aroused, it becomes a colossus mauling up the flotsam and jetsam of the patriarchal order. She and the likes of her, enthrall and enslave the men and become successful as it is evident in Shonali’s (Aasha’s friend in London) exhortive speech:

These men who seek out company are powerful, rich and influential. They control the world. They find us relaxing, charming and desirable. We are doing them a favour—they spend their days under stress and tension. Their lives are complicated, their wives are bitches, their children hate them and their English girlfriends use them. We are safe. We give them what they want. That’s why we are successful. (13)

_Starry Nights_ furthers the theme of a liberated woman; it is but an extension of the frontiers of feminism. As one launched in the tinsel town of Bombay, she, with an unfeminine vehemence, becomes a liberated woman who lives for her own pleasures and knows no value-system. Sexual encounters and compromises are a routine affair in her life. In her infatuation for Akshay, the reigning star of the film-world she feels no qualms of conscience in performing oral-sex with him. Immersed in the ecstasy of tremendous excitement, she only remembers how “all the hirsute, sweaty men she’d been forced to lick—all over—whose body hairs” (17). Aasha Rani is indeed a symbol of liberated woman. Throughout the novel, Karuna the protagonist of _Socialite Evenings_ tries to
assert her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. Her marriage is a "failure since there doesn’t exist mutual love and trust in their life. She says “We were reduced to being marginal people… Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about…” (69). She declares: “I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started” (185).

Aasha Rani’s lesbian experience with Linda is not just a variant sexual behaviour but it has relevance to her character. Her lesbian affair may not be central to the novel *Starry Nights* and she cannot be called a lesbian, for she does not show much preference for it, yet it does have a bearing on her character. On a deeper level of consciousness this experience implies independence from a man. The female characters in *Snapshots* are more powerful than their male counterparts. Men are peripheral and they fail to control women either with their sexuality or with ideological precepts. Women in her novels are empowered by female sexuality. They exert, control, domination and influence on others. Champa Bai, a prostitute in the novel claims “we are here to satisfy their lust not for sex but for power” (43). Champa Bai is closer to the French feminists who say that women sexuality wields power.

Shobha De’s novel *Strange Obsession* revolves around the life and lustful relationship of two young women, Amrita and Meenakshi. Fundamentally, it seems to be a psychological study of sexual obsession of mysterious woman Meenakshi, also known as Minx, and her calamitous end. Amrita, who comes
from a noble and educated family, decides to search her lot in modelling. In order to execute her long cherished desire, she settles down in Bombay. There, she encounters Minx, a modern high flown lady, free from all taboos and values. Being a daughter of Inspector General, she is always conscious of exploiting the power and position for her gimmicks. She is a pervert and polluted in her thought and plan. Even in the initial meeting with Amrit, “Meenakshi stared into the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen and forgot what she wanted to say” (5). Amrita finds herself unable to conceive the unusual and crazy feeling of Minx and utters: “But let alone a woman, no man had ever looked at her the way Minx just had. And no pervious compliment had affected her in the same manner” (6). Both of them represent the different kinds of typology of modern urban set up. They seem to be hardly better than school girls playing adult games. It is through their behaviour and conversation that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of these two young women.

This novel does not deal with the struggle for power, but depicts lesbian relationship. Minx is a lesbian, who is thoroughly deprived of womanliness and she has a strange obsession for Amrita. On the thematic plane there does not seem to be a question of power. On the theoretical plane, it is difficult to disagree with the basic questions of power-pleasure as Foucault underlines. In her theoretical perspective, Shobha De argues that eventually, every
relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level. The very concept of the sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive.

In psycho-analytical framework, Minx is a fit case to be treated as pervert, obsessed and crazy who manipulates Amrita, a young lady full of love, warmth and innocence. Even in fictive terms, Amrita proves to be nectar for Minx as her name connotes. Amrita once rebukes Minx saying “Weird and abnormal”. Minx through her shrewd effort tries to allure her:

What are you talking about? You think I’m bloody lesbian, don’t you? Well, guess what. You are wrong. And so are all of them who’ve been telling you that. I’m not a dyke. I’m not kinky. And I’m certainly not crazy… but I’m in love with you, I Love you. I adore you. It is not sexual. I don’t wish to go to bed with you. All I want is to be around you. (22)

She is extremely passionate for Amrita and sometimes becomes violent. Out of her intense sexual feeling, Minx utters: “Sweet, Sweet Amrit, you have become a part of me. You live right here in my body. I can feel your presence inside me all the time” (23).

In the case of relationship between Amrita and Minx, the socio-psychological situation is altogether different. This kind of relationship is rather something unnatural, unexpected or a part of abnormal psychology. Amrita has natural inclination for heterosexuality but Minx has almost developed abhorrence for it. She is not ready to allow Amrita to get or select a
boy friend of her. Minx, out of her utter possessiveness, says, “I Love you. I have to protect you. It’s my duty” (36).

Minx does not have any emotional feeling for Amrita. To Minx, same sex does not create any hurdle. Minx says, ‘Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because I belong to the same sex? Is that my only sin?’ (44). She says that “there is nothing abnormal about my feeling for you” (44). Shobha De nowhere pleads for lesbianism. Minx enjoyed sexual encounter with Amrita. Just after this experience, Amrita became conscious of her guilt. She is conscious of her sexual identity and so she raises a question to Minx when she argues for the satisfaction of Amrita, “You want a prick to enter you—I’ll go out and get one” (110) the woman in Amrita replies, “You may be able to get some quick to stitch on a plastic disk. But will that make me pregnant? Will you be able to fill my womb with a child?” (110).

Feminism as such has to attempt a new definition of woman’s role in the wider social frame. Shobha De herself makes her stand clear when Minx’s mother says:

My daughter is the severely disturbed child of a disturbed mother. She suffers from delusions, she tells lies, she makes up stories, and the number of schools she has been expelled from has their own tales to tell. (203)

Amrita is saved by her husband. At last Minx dies and Amrita feels liberated. According to the feminist theory, sex does not mean sexuality or
sexual preference which stands for a person’s pattern of erotic attraction. Similarly, gender does not apparently correspond to sexuality. Warhol analyses this complexity:

A person of the female sex who is erotically attracted primarily to persons of her own sex (who may or may not refer to herself as lesbian, another term whose definition is under debate within feminism) might be either strongly feminine or strongly masculine in her gendered self-presentation, or most likely-her gender identity would, like most homosexual persons, be made up of a complicated combination of gender ‘differences within’. (310)

In the beginning of the novel, we see Amrita, an affluent model of Delhi, who aspires to become a top ranked model in Bombay and leaves her family in order to realize her dream. Amrita, 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. In an alien city, Bombay, she handles her affairs well, clinching some stunningly lucrative modelling assignments, and unsettling the already established models with her winning performance. Bombay however proves a bit clumsy. She runs into Meenakshi Iyenger (Minx) right in the beginning of her stay in Bombay and starts facing fearsome turmoil in her hitherto balanced life. Minx, the lesbian sex-monger, chases her and causes her deep anxieties.
Shobha De, however, depicts Amrita to be level-headed and self-reliant. It is interesting to note how she gets into a physical relationship with Rover. It all starts with a forced kiss that he implants on her but in that he wins her completely and despite the fact the people warn her about Rover who is a narcissistic bore she knows that she has to make relation with him. Such is the spell of his physical charm that she can’t resist him. It is quite obvious that knowing Rover’s nature, there is no dream in Amrita about a permanent relation with him based on love. She has not even once been shown to experience anything tender like love for Rover. All she feels is an irresistible passion which overwhelms her and rifts whenever she gets caught in a physical urge for him. She chooses to neglect an established social convention in order to be with her lover who she knows “treats his woman like dirt”. She has already been told that “he’ll use you and discard you”, (593) yet she goes for Rover; goes for having sex without any proper promise for stability in their relationship. She treats disdainfully the orthodox conventionally going by which she would certainly have reached for a stable if not permanent relation with Rover. Knowing well that her affair with Rover is just a transitory phase in her life, she participates in her sexual escapades with him.

Minx chases Amrita everywhere in Bombay, acts as her protector, promoter and lover, destroys Amrita’s business rivals and finally drags her into a lesbian relation with her. She is a wild woman of irrepressible emotions; she is deceptive and dodgy and is prepared to play all the trips up her sleeve to
have Amrita in love with her. She disdains men and to justify her hatred for men she narrates the story how she was raped by her own father at the age of thirteen. Though Minx’s father terms her an extremely clever and manipulative liar and declines to have raped her, the reader is made to harbour the impression that her claims might be true. In fact, throughout the novel, the reader vaguely sympathizes with Minx despite her weird obsession to possess Amrita and own her overwhelmingly.

Though the character of Minx has apparently been created to highlight a negative side of feminism as she seems to have run to extremes to destroy the patriarchal male culture and its age-old taboos, she too has her moments of glory. Minx, the psychic and obsessed lesbian of Shobha De, attempts to destabilize the continuing complacency in one’s view about sex and morality as she makes a speech that sounds rationalistic and probing as she blurts out a sarcastic enquiry:

Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because Is that my only sin? Is that my only sin? You find it sickening to accept my love...But what about that animal Rover’s love? That’s O.K. You enjoy that. How come? And it’s normal. Bullshit! There is nothing abnormal about my feelings for you. It is your problem that you have hang-ups. (596)

Thus Shobha De’s women refuse to align themselves with the prevailing, patriarchal ideology. They essentially are the assertive women who,
like Amrita and Minx, often take up revolutionary roles and want to destroy the existing manliest social structure. In order to prove a point, these women resort to radical lesbianism or an uninhibited sexual play with different men. The sexual escapades of Amrita and Mikki in *Strange Obsession* and *Sisters* respectively substantiate such assumption. It is true that Rover in *Strange Obsession* and Binny Malhorta in *Sisters* fascinate and overpower Amrita and Mikki respectively for a while but it is never too late before the assertive women of Shobha De bounce back triumphantly. Consequently, one sees the men whose authority has been defied and deflated by the women in Shobha De’s works. The men in her novels are either lovable but ineffectual like Rakesh whom Amrita loves and marries but goes out to save him from the clutches of Minx rather than his saving her, or disgustingly hollow and hypocritical like Binny Malhotra, Rover and Ramankaka. There however are certain level-headed men like Shanay in *Sisters* and Karan in *Strange Obsession* who are virtuous but fail to control reality at any stage of the novels. It is thus a world essentially carved and shaped by women in Shobha De’s novels. They debunk and defy the male hypocrisy and their supposed authority. Casting aside their submissiveness, they run to the extremes of being violently radical, defiantly uncompromising, overly promiscuous and even openly malicious. They revel in an uninhabited universe where the man is pushed into a corner and forced to live a secluded and subdued existence.
Like her earlier novels, *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*, Shobha De’s novel *Sisters* is unique for its racy narrative quality and its ostensibly intimate view of glitzy side of Bombay life. Unlike its predecessors, *Sisters* for the first time deals with the psychic conflict in its liberated woman-protagonist who is caught between a personal self and a societal self. The novel thus focuses as much on the seamy side of the business life as on the inner turmoil of the protagonist. The novel *Sisters*, set in the corrupt world of big business, appears to tell an interesting story of two wealthy and socialite women who, driven by ambition and lust, are involved in an unending rivalry. It is in Mallika (Mikki) that one may encounter a woman who struggles against the constraints of being a woman and finally completes her odyssey towards being herself. When the narrative opens, Mikki, the protagonist, compelled by the untimely death of her parents in an air-crash, leaves America for Bombay to take charge of her father’s industries which are verging on collapse. It is too much burdening for a woman like Mikki. She is in reality, unprepared for any responsibility that can deprive her of her personal freedom. Her initial version for the corporate business is mainly due to her fear of losing the colourful life in America where she has had her first taste of life.

Left with no alternative, Mikki decides to lead the sprawling industries. Once she gets into her father’s shoes, she begins to show her managerial skills. In no time she is beset on all sides by the creditors, takeover tycoons and unreliable associates. Having learnt that she has a sister, Alisha, her father’s
illegitimate child, Mikki feels obliged to make her a partner in the business. In reality, Mikki, with the demise of her parents, feels lonely and the existence of Alisha, although strangers to each other, gives her a sense of solace and she is strengthened morally. It is not Alisha’s wealth that makes Mikki think of her, but her faith in human values that prompts her to establish relationship with Alisha. Preoccupied as she is with her own self, Mikki is determined to save the industries from going bankrupt.

Then Mikki marries Binny. It is indeed surprising to note that unlike Shobha De’s other women characters who generally tend to free themselves from the clutches of married life, Mikki deliberately gets into wedlock. Though she has been enamoured of the life of freedom, she is not averse to being a wife. What she does not like is the inhuman subordination of the woman and confining her to four walls of the kitchen. With her education in America and progressive thinking, Mikki gives into Binny whom she loves very much. In the beginning, Binny appears to be all attention towards Mikki who “enjoyed his experienced approach and found herself discovering aspects of her own sexuality, she hadn’t guessed existed”. In his company, she not only gets an insight into her real self but also feels a sense of security. Thus she prides herself on being his wife. The narrator tells:

She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon. If this was what her man wanted, if this was what made him happy, she should give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her body, her mind, and her soul. She
was in love with him. And he was finally hers ... He is like a God to me. I don’t care who he sleeps with. (486)

It is this submission, a characteristic of the traditional woman, which adds to the superiority of man and consequent exploitation of woman. However, her honeymoon with Binny ends in a fiasco. Binny, the womanizer has already got a family and his marriage with Mikki is only to keep up his image in the society. Strongly enough, Mikki, having learnt this, remains silent, for she does not care for his past life. She cannot tolerate Binny’s indifference to her. The process of dehumanization of Mikki begins, when all her property is transferred to Binny. Besides, she is denied motherhood, for she has to keep always fit for him. Being a representative of the oppressive system, Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner both in life and business. He is characteristically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife “who stays at home and looks after me... our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going” (109). This is exactly what puts Mikki off but, as she is conscious of her precarious condition, she pleads with him: “I can look after you and look after at least a part of the business. We could work together.... I won’t have to wait hours to see you” (109).

Mikki’s situation in the novel throws light on the harsh realities of the patriarchal society. It also hints at the growing awareness among the women
who begin to rise from the eternal slumber and call shots. Mikki’s continual protest with Binny results in her innate desire for freedom.

Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. Although she fails to find in Binny a man with whom she could share her life, Mikki is “willing to compromise her own life if it meant he’d notice her, listen to her, and acknowledge her existence” (140). Her dream to enjoy the fruit of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. She pleads innocence and tells him: “Binny….. I love you. Only you…. I can’t live without you” (141). In fact, her disillusionment with Binny is total when he goes in for a divorce. All her efforts to live with him fail. Mikki is determined to retain her industries with which she identifies herself. However, long before she does anything, she again finds herself in the saddle, when Binny along with his illegitimate family meets his death. Mikki is a changed woman now. Her experience with Binny gives her an insight into her being as a woman and an individual. 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.

Unlike Mikki, “a prim and proper mistress of the manner, all correct and sober talk” (187), Alisha, an insecure and lovable young woman, leads a flirtatious life which, though it seems a breach of the moral code, is a sure pointer to the arrival of a new value system, and mode of self-assertion. Alisha’s hatred for Mikki is based on her sense of being neglected by her father. She is a victim of her own illusions. In fact, she needs her sister more
than Mikki does. Mikki’s efforts to improve the strained relations between them become worse when her enemies poison Alisha’s ears. Alisha imitates her sister and finds a sense of satisfaction when Mikki is rejected. She traps Navin and indulges in fornication, not to satisfy her carnal yearning but to show Mikki that she is not inferior to anyone. She misses no opportunity to insult her sister. In fact, Alisha knowingly leads an amorous life with a married person. Her emotional involvement with this man is so deep that she becomes a drug addict. Although they attempt alike to find fulfilment in their life, both the sisters are different from each other. Mikki’s encounter with different men helps her grow into an independent-minded woman, while Alisha, failing to get any hint from her experience, becomes an introvert.

Ironically, Mikky and Alisha are united only after the death of the latter’s mother. With her motherly affection, Mikki attempts to soothe the wounded self of her sister. She helps her get over all the emotional hurdles in her life. The novel comes to an end with both the sisters realizing the need to live together. The structure of the novel is cinematic with its climax, being reminiscent of one of the most make-believe scenes of the modern pop cinema. The novel *Sisters*, which covers four years in the life of Mikki, is a fine study in the traumatic experiences of a woman caught up in the whirlpool of complex human situations. In *Sisters*, the novelist focuses her attention neither on the aristocrats of high social circles nor on the stars or starlets of the Bombay film industry, but on the intriguing corporate world of business tycoons. The story
unfolds in a Gujarati milieu, with a young girl Mallika Hiralal returning from the U.S.A. to attend the funeral of her rich parents who have died in an air crash. Very soon, she is exposed to the duplicity of her father as she discovers that she has a half-sister Alisha Metha born of a mistress four months after her. She feels betrayed. She was not told anything about Alisha by her mother or by anybody else for that matter. Now, she thinks of her father: “Her father, always distant, now seemed a total stranger. A stranger who’s led a sneaky double life” (12).

She wanted to know from her parents the truth about what really happened but now both of them are gone. She, however, decides to claim the only blood-relative she is left with. While the lonely Mikki wants to befriend Alisha and help her out, she finds the latter to be rude, unfriendly, jealous and full of hatred towards her. Things are already in a bad shape at her father’s Hiralal Industries. Her father had made some hasty decisions during the last two years and borrowed heavily. He also got involved in ventures floated by entrepreneurs of dubious character. He lost a great deal of money on his Malaysian adventure.

Nevertheless, Mallika takes the reins of her father’s empire in her hands and soon realizes that her father’s trusted employee Ramanbhai could not be relied upon for he had been discouraging her to take interest in business. He once remarked to her.
Had you been a son, your father might have taken you into his confidence from a young age and guided you properly from the beginning. But as a daughter, all he wanted for you was a good husband—that is all…. My advice is leave these serious matters to me. I am there to handle them. Trust me. I will guard your interests like a father. But you will make things difficult for yourself if you do things without consulting me. (30)

Soon she finds that it is Alisha who gets the pulp and turns into rich heiress, while she (Mallika) holds on to her father’s crumbling empire. The central event of the novel is the quest of Mallika to win her sister Alisha and wants to be a rich lady. After many vicissitudes, 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)

Shanay, Navin, Binny Malhotra—the suitors of Mallika are the big shots ready to swallow her. It is, however, Binny Malhotra who not only gets Mikki but also fabulous assets and industries of her father. Amy, Anjanaben,
Leelaben—mother of Alisha, Dr. Kurien, Lucio and many other characters in the novel remain in the backdrop and hardly emerge as powerfully drawn characters. The images of women, radically altered by the modern feminist writers, illustrate exploitation carried out not by men but women.

Shobha De’s *Snapshots* projects an urban society where men stand on the periphery and women battle for power and supremacy. The power-hungry female characters of the novel fly at each other’s throat, invent schemes to control and dominate over the weaknesses of their so-called friends. Through the album of their life, Shobha De projects the elaborated or expanded challenges, predicaments and values of these actors, often shocking and disgusting. The novel emblematizes woman-power at its worst. The novel unveils the life of six girls of Santa Maria High School, leading predictable mundane lives of domesticity and imagined bliss. Through foreseeable roles of mother and wives, they had drifted to their respective world of routine marriage and divorce. Swati one of the girls now residing in London, had been asked to write a “bold and meaty” serial on urban women (222). She plans a meeting with her school-time friends. Reema, Aparna, Surekha, Rashmi and Noor, despite their dislike for Swati decide to join the party because since their days Swati always had “some kind of power over” others. All that she was to do was to “snap her fingers” and the rest them “jumped” (181). Undoubtedly, Swati is the most powerful woman who demonstrates her control over men and women alike. Reema taunts her: “Poor Swati. Must be awful to be childless.
No?” (89). Aparna tells Swati that “she is the most dangerous person she knows” (183). The relation between woman’s power and motherhood had been established way back by patriarchy for personal gains.

It is not uncommon to see that individuals gain power by revealing the dark facts of their opponents’ lives and blackmailing them for their personal gains. Aparna is the victim of Rohit’s cruelty. Swati seduced Rohit and ruined the married life of Aparna. Noor, the nervous and weak girl of the group, exerts pressure on the more powerful members of this drama. She is the victim, predated by her own brother Nawaz. Shobha De has visualized “changed power equations” which men find it difficult to accept. Even the attitudes towards the prostitutes have changed. The women of the brothels are no longer the discarded, pitied and the isolated lot. They can claim like Champa Bai: “we are here to satisfy their lust not for sex but for power” (43). Thus unconsciously, Champa Bai emphasizes the theory of French feminists that woman’s sexuality wields power. The over-confidence of man misguides them to believe that they are the masters of female sexuality.

Relationship in brothels is unlicensed but sanctioned relationship, a product of marriage, is no better! As Rashmi comments that mediocre women use “sex as bait but the shrewd women hold their men and keep them enslaved” (49). Out-spoken Swati claims, “We rejoice in our sexuality…. We do not suppress it, we don’t dismiss it… Sex does not threaten us” (165). This psychology definitely reduces man’s power over women. Men, because of
their sexual dominance, have always felt like “conquerors” (93) and their sexual exploits have been their “conquests” (207). Women’s subordinate role in the power game has been radically altered by Shobha De. Modern, urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women of Shobha De have transformed themselves from commodities to identities. Balbir is, the lone man in the company of ladies in Snapshots when he asks the six women of the novel, “do you fuck because you enjoy fucking? Or is it power play” (162). Balbir discusses the male organ and Swati claims to be a cock-worshipper and proclaims her admiration for Konark and Kama Sutra. Gradually the get-together degenerates into bickering and quarrels.

Marriage ‘a patriarchal enclosure’ can no longer hold woman down. Marriage and motherhood, symbols of parental authority and power, are defused by Shobha De through Rashmi, an unwed mother; Swati and Aparna are divorcees and yet sufficiently powerful to reject the sexuality of men. Swati may marry on her own terms but for Aparna husband is an “awful” and “dirty” word; Reema uses her husband for her material comfort. The sanctity of marriage prescribed especially for women is conveniently diluted by Shobha De’s women. Reema enjoys a relationship with her brother-in-law; Noor’s mother is man-crazy, Surekha has a more - satisfying relationship with a woman; Swati considers man to be a commodity that she can acquire from the open market. The basic issues and values of life have been totally transformed by these ladies. Man’s loss has been woman’s gain with the awakening of the
power consciousness, sexuality and economic independence; new sensibilities have been included in woman’s personality. Power grabbing through ethical and non-ethical means, no longer remains to be the right of man. Woman, like her counterpart, has realized the truth that all is fair in love and war. Power has ceased to remain a personal property of patriarchy. In the novel, Rashmi is the only one, who despite her rebellion remains a victim. Noor exposes the designs of Swati that the party is arranged by Swati in the preparation of a serial ‘Sisters of the Subcontinent’ that will bring her money and fame. Noor commits suicide and Rashmi is sent to hospital. Rohit, Pips, Mr Bridges, Juan and Balbir’s father are all presented as male chauvinists. Aparna, Rashmi, Swati and Noor are all the victims. The vision emanating from Rashmi’s experience is that a woman must have a man: “Hang on to the man” (50). For a career woman “it is important to have a man to back them up” (150). The novel describes the activities of so called liberated women who indulge in extra-marital relationships and lesbianism. The novelist shows how these women rebel against the old norms and values of society overthrowing the established norms.

Shobha De, like all feminist writers, is deeply concerned with the alignment of power that exerts physical, political, economic and social control over woman to fragment her. Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights* fights her battle with some degree of propriety. Karuna of *Socialite Evenings* constructs a convincing case to project woman’s power. Swati in *Snapshots* belongs to this
category. Her life-style, modelling methods and her shocking journalistic essays may go against the conventional norms of Indian society, but she proves her point that it is only power that matters. In *Snapshots*, the six friends disregard male power totally by negating the norms of traditional female behaviour prescribed by patriarchy. Being strong physically and intellectually, they hold the reins of power firmly in their hands. In her novels, it becomes increasingly evident that man’s power-status is fragile and his position can be destabilized consciously. His loss of power is undeniably visible through his incapability to dwarf, maim or victimize women for his personal gains. The women of *Snapshots* create their own moulds and music.

The fifth novel of Shobha De, *Sultry Days* does contain women who are obsessed with men; they, too, indulge in beating men at their own game but here the readers also come across some glimpses of commitment, thereby giving credence to the fact that not all writings of Shobha De are aberrations and that there is a possibility of even her returning to the mainstream of writing after a few sallies.

Unlike *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*, the novel *Sultry Days* has apparently a man as the central character. The narrator or the protagonist is however, a woman but it is through the male character Deb that Nisha discovers herself. From the beginning one is aware of Nisha’s attraction for Deb who is also referred to as God by most of his college chums. She is attracted to Deb because he is a mixture of opposites. His appearance is
shabby; he wears days’ old stubble, always scratches his matted locks which were full of lice-nests, smokes biddies, is a man of loose morals and has had several girls by the time he reached college. His attitude towards girls is also simple-use them and leave them. Despite his shabby appearance, “Gods hands and fingernails were surprisingly, neat and clean” (Sultry Days 101-104). He knows many languages such as German, French and Spanish. He had already read Chaucer and Karl Marx before leaving school. He is the son of a communist and himself a communist, gets arrested while taking out Morchas.

God’s entry into the literary circuit is through proof-checking but he soon discovers that he can do more than just read other people’s proofs. Through his association with art magazine Plume, God’s career takes an upward turn. Now, God starts sinking in the estimate of Nisha. To her, God had at one time symbolized ‘commitment’ but gradually he loses all shreds of self-respect. As for Nisha, hers is 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 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. Here it may be remarked that it is the ‘commitments’ of God that help Nisha to remain at the periphery of such a life. As God gets more and more the taste of power and money, his commitments appear to be pseudo-commitments. Although Nisha does not have any pronounced commitments of her own, yet her constant companionship with Deb reveals the gulf between herself and Deb’s pseudo-commitments. That
she does not approve of God’s new way of life is made clear several times by her in the course of the narrative. One such reaction would suffice here:

No I didn’t like what was happening to God at all. We were beginning to see less and less of each other now that he didn’t need to touch me for cash that often. He was getting ahead professionally, meeting all the VIPs in town, interviewing, culture-vultures and generally being wooed by ‘all those who mattered’ in the High-life of the city. (100)

Even the occasional meeting between Nisha and God turns out to be a confrontation. After one such meeting God calls her *Jhooti bitch* and Nisha’s rejoinder is *capitalist Kutta*. This is the nadir of their relationship. It is actually the point when Nisha has completely seen through his so-called commitments. Simply by not becoming a part of God’s pseudo-commitments, Nisha begins to discover her own commitments. Her commitment towards the end of the novel emerges as a commitment to a cause. She exposes Yashwantbhai 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, one can see that by dedicating herself to a cause, the character of Nisha rises. Actually Nisha’s rise has to be seen in the context of
the degeneration of God’s character. It is only when Nisha has some inkling of her commitments that she is able to seek some kind of an identification with the women and men-folk of the middle class. In the novel, Pramila is the only character whose experience sums up in nutshell the cause charted by women characters whom one has called aberration.

It also shows that the only ray of hope for such women is to return to their roots and join the mainstream. “Pramila is a Nagpur woman who has everything that a traditional woman can 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”, (160) yet she feels bored, suffocated and frustrated in this environment. She is highly talented. This puts ideas in her head and she sets on the road of becoming an emancipated woman. She starts writing poems and within a year she decides that Nagpur is not the place for her and her talents. Suddenly, without informing anyone, she goes to Bombay. Her poems are translated into English there and she becomes very popular. In order to become ‘the completely emancipated woman’, she divorces her husband and takes her two daughters with her. These, then are the stages in the path of her becoming the emancipated woman; boredom and frustration with her surrounding, disappearing from Nagpur and appearing on the Bombay scene, taking up English writing and discarding Marathi and divorcing her husband. In this world of glamour, a stage comes when she overreaches herself. She miscalculates that Yashwantbhai, an underworld king and mafia don is in her
power. This results in a traumatic experience wherein her life is threatened and she is forced to go in hiding. After the traumatic experience, Nisha is for some time a shattered woman but when her mother and Pratimaben find her out and take up her cause against Yashwantbhai, she discovers a new meaning in life. She fearlessly exposes Yashwantbhai. Though she does not succeed in making any impression upon Yashwantbhai and though she knows that Yashwantbhai’s present inaction does not mean that he has accepted defeat and that he is coolly waiting for the time when he can strike back, yet Pramila has found a cause. The cause is to join the movement which seeks to expose persons like Yashwantbhai. This changes her life and she returns to the roots where she belongs.

Shobha De deals with neurotic women, amoral and shamelessly engrossed in their blatant enjoyment of life’s pleasures. “Sex, to Shobha De, is “the bedrock of all relationships” (The Illustrated Weekly of India, 6, November 1992). Marriage is often regarded as essential in the novel. Deb never marries Nisha, although he has a prolonged affair with her. Pramila runs to Bombay, leaving behind her family, to save herself from suffocating boredom and frustration. The drama of the novel has the backdrop of Bombay in the last decade of the present century.

Shobha De reconstructs the tradition and explores the experiences of six women—Swati, Aparna, Reema, Noor, Surekha and Rashmi in the novel Snapshot now living in magnified domestic bliss. These six characters form
the core of the novel and the men are shifted to the periphery. Surekha, a middle class housewife, pretends to be very concerned about her mother-in-law but the hard truth behind this is her homosexual interest in her friend Dolly (152). The truth of cosmopolitan Bombay reflects the psychological separation of Indian women. Surekha manages to keep her husband happy and yet, insures a space of her own. She manipulates to livelavishly like Reema by controlling her husband’s sexual urges. Reema claims confidently, “My husband is lost without me… feed them well. Fuck them regularly and sit tight” (151). She enjoys an illicit relationship with her own brother-in-law Randhir and suffers from no guilty feelings. The patriarchal enclosure of marriage had failed to trap her. Interestingly, matrimony has granted greater power to her. The colonial rule of the husband is deactivated in *Snapshots*. Reema has only one daughter and she refuses to become a child producing machine. During her school-going years, she had conceived her boy-friend Raju’s child. At that point of time, she was the victim and he the victimizer. But very soon, Raju had lost the battle; his body was found near a “sewage dump” (101).

Aparna’s metamorphosis in the novel is very transparent. She moves from the colonial to the postcolonial emotional dynamics of woman. “Aparna had grown up with shame. Shame about her body. Shame about her adolescent looks…. shame about practically every aspect of her life. It was the environment she was raised in. Guilt was its defining feature” (16). She is not fragmented by the psychology of “guilt” and “inferiority” instilled in her by
society. She revolts and uses her ‘sexual potential’ to enjoy life. Very often, she participates in erotic sexual behaviour and knows the entire exercise as mere lust and yet, she is not ashamed of her feelings. With a vengeance she goes for desalinization of the Self. Aparna is a divorcee; undeterred, she reaches the top rung of the corporate ladder; nothing can undermine her confidence and wholeness. In her social and professional sphere, her conduct is anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial. To her, “husband” is an “awful” word. “Marriage the destiny traditionally offered by society” (Beauvoir 425) to woman, is rejected by Aparna.

Shobha De’s women, realizing that female empowerment is a product of financial independence, are very often career-minded personalities. Man’s insistence on economic control emerges from his knowledge of the best way to keep women /slaves paralysed. Shashi Despande’s female protagonist in That Long Silence is less independent than her illiterate maid who earns her own livelihood. Shobha De has granted financial freedom to her female creatures in Snapshots. They either earn individually or control the finances of their husbands by their cleverness. Each female character in Snapshots desires for power, enjoys power, and battles to control power. Power-conscious ambitious women are the product of postcolonial culture. The realization that their power is rooted in their sexuality, it has a “potential” and it is not a “danger”, has enabled them to challenge the traditional concept of morality. Champa Bai the prostitute is self-aware to claim, “we are here to satisfy their lust not for sex but
for power” (43). Her claim concretizes woman’s role in the game of power. The conventional woman is a model of physical exploitation but Shobha De’s women, in this particular novel, are the masters of their destiny. This makes Balbir, Reema’s brother-in-law, ask the girls, “Do you fuck with other feminist writers, challenges the traditional values of womanhood?” (162). The institution of marriage and family, work culture related to woman’s domestic and non-domestic duties are openly questioned and deconstructed in the novel. In Shobha De’s fictional world, successful working women are worldly wise and live their lives as they please.

The narrator of the novel Second Thoughts is the female-protagonist, Maya. In Second Thoughts Shobha De vividly presents an “explosive tale of love and betrayal” at the surface level and the “hollowness and hypocrisy” lurking behind Indian traditional marriages at the deeper level. Maya is a very attractive young girl with her “skin tone as warm rich, golden brown, like sunlight dancing on the Hooghly”, “gleaming jet, black hair” and “large, dark eyes.” (4). Maya trained as a Textile Designer, is a charming young girl. Earlier she wanted to become a leading journalist. She belongs to an educated middle class family from Calcutta. She marries Ranjan who is equally handsome and ambitious. He has thick dark hair, the intense large eyes, strong chest and shoulders. He has a degree from America and has been employed as a Bank Executive. He has a small but beautiful flat on the fourth floor in Bombay. In their first arranged meeting, Maya and Ranjan have great respect
for his mother who is quite happy with her son’s wife. She says, “I think we have made right choice in Maya” (252). So was the impression of Maya who thought that marrying Ranjan was like marrying Bombay; “I thought I was the luckiest girl in my locality” (252). As the story advances it becomes clear that both Maya and Ranjan were not made for each other. In other words, it was not a right decision as far as their so-called marriage is concerned. The marriage disturbs their domestic harmony considerably.

One of the reasons for the failure of their marriage is that Maya has no contentment at all and she feels that her husband Ranjan is unable to satisfy her basic needs. Ranjan is very cold from sexual point of view. Maya thinks that she will bear no child in future. This is the reason why she feels empty amidst plenty. Maya’s husband worships his mother like Goddess but neglects Maya. In fact it is Ranjan’s mother’s obsession that mortifies Maya most. Her husband wants her to emulate his mother as an ideal woman. When Ranjan’s boss Tom comes for the special dinner and appreciates the artistic touch inside the house, Ranjan says that the credit goes to his mother, a very artistic lady. These words of Ranjan upset Maya, the real doer of the decoration. Ranjan is not honest enough to appreciate the artistic talent of his wife and it hurts Maya. Ranjan seems to have mother fixation.

Maya experiences so much shock instead of pleasure during their four-day clumsy honeymoon at a depressing hotel in Mahabaleshwar, a hill resort near Bombay. Strangely enough, she comes to know from him on enquiry that
he shared bed with other women. When Maya is interested in a love-making mood, Ranjan asks her to wait and says, “I am not ready yet Maya…. You will have to be patient. It is going to take time. I can’t. I just can’t” (55). When Maya tries to force him, he recoils—jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He keeps trembling in bed for a long time breathing heavly and asks her to stop behaving like “a cheap woman “(259). This incident helps readers understand Maya’s plights. Maya as the wife of Ranjan is not able to enjoy the conjugal bliss in the true sense of the term. She resembles in some respect Maya, the protagonist of the novel *Cry, The Peacock*.

Maya needs someone to love her. She turns to Nikhil for the purpose. Nikhil, a college boy, is “good looking, confident, sporty, cocky, flirtatious, lazy, spoilt and quite irresistible” (22). Unlike Ranjan he is “hungry always” (54). In fact, Maya is not a cheap woman. Maya fully realizes that her wedding with Ranjan was a blunder on her part. Ranjan tries to restrain Maya’s freedom. She is not allowed to mix with other women of Bombay. No educated woman of Maya’s calibre can tolerate this sort of nonsense. This is also one of the factors behind the conflict between Maya and Ranjan. Ranjan and Maya are incompatible with each other. Asha Khare rightly observes in her article “The Text and Context in Shobha De’s *Second Thoughts*”:

The story depicts over-bearing female characters and weak male characters. It exposes the male ego, social pretence, and public facades. It is a tale of two cities, Bombay and Calcutta, which contains vivid descriptions of the two with details of food and
dresses. Sexual overtones, the chief characteristic of Shobha De’s work are over-riding throughout the novel. (172)

Thus Shobha De’s *Second Thoughts* throws light on the effects of the traditional marriage in Indian society in which a woman has to suffer a lot. Maya’s silent cry for true companionship for herself always remains unheard. The hollowness of such marriages is evident even in the case of Maya’s parents, who “hardly ever talked to each other’ and even their “quarrels of heated arguments were out of question” (70). Even the title *Second Thoughts* is also quite suggestive as far as the protagonist’s affair with Nikhil is concerned. Rita seems to sum up her indictment of marriage from the vamp point of view: “most women hate their husbands – it is a fact. They hate marriage. That is also a fact….The only way to make a marriage work is through sex and most women hate that too” (50).

Shobha De seems to be closer to the vamp ideology of feminism in the sense that she shows how self-destructive the attempts to achieve liberation have been for Aasha Rani and Sudha and will be for others as well. Shobha De in her fictional world demolishes the mythical and iconographic images of woman imposed by patriarchal structures and conceptualizes women as a composite energy of production, protection and love. The protagonists of Shobha De protest against oppression and exploitation in all possible ways. Her novels have often evoked hostile reviews in spite of their grand sales. The protagonists of her novels are new Indian women who assert themselves with a
rebellious defiance against the well-entrenched moral orthodox of the patriarchal social-system for total emancipation.

Taking a clue from M.H. Abrams’ much celebrated *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the symbols of mirror and lamp are used to illustrate and illuminate “the intellectual assumptions and strategies of most contemporary feminist theorists”(Gilbert145). The mirror, for the feminist critics “becomes a space in which to capture the shifting historical images of gendered reality” (145). Often, holding on to the belief that literature “is a reflection of objects and events”, (145) they employ texts to explore social and psychological contexts and issues. What Gilbert and Gubar postulate about the feminist critic is largely true of the feminist author also. The feminist author of the mirror category tries to rebuild the past, often questioning the misinterpreted and distorted cultural history. He does not challenge the concepts of reality which underlie the very activities of periodization and evaluation under the patriarchal umbrella. Their female characters, generally speaking, display a remarkably new sensibility and sensitivity that enable them to protest against the timeworn shibboleths of a patriarchal order. They, no doubt, ask for a re-interpretation of Indian social and cultural history. Even making allowance for their bold initiatives in feminism in Indian English fiction, they do not turf out the ground-realities.

The second category in which Gilbert and Gubar place the more vocal and violent feminist critic is that of vamp. The lamp that stands for the artist’s
subjectivity and inspiration in M.H. Abrams’ work, undergoes a mutational metamorphosis in their critical framework and becomes a vamp serving as a paradigm for the artist’s expressive autonomy as well as “for rebelliously antirational and anti-hierarchical impulses that have been repressed but not erased by patriarchal culture”. The vamp artists, like other feminists, also demand total liberation from the male-domination, a re-writing of female discourse and deconstruction of the binary opposites of culture/nature, man/woman, mind/body, day/night, reason/imagination etc, in their works. They hate nay dislike, the phallocentric standards of art, culture and history. The singularity of the ‘vamp’ artist lies in his “defiantly inspired and demonically sensual attack on, indeed, a seduction and betrayal of patriarchal system of thought” (145).

Silhouetted against the camp of vamp artists, the authors in the mirror category appear distinctly rational and classical. The mirror authors are definitely full of decorum and rationalism and do not believe in breaking down the aesthetic taboos in pell-mell fashion. To the contrary “like a dark double, the vamp acts out the desire for the apocalyptic revolution against law and order that lurks on the other side of the mirror” (157).

The mirror critics believe in the entity called author while the vamp critics deny the existence of the creator of the text-thanks to the new critical theories of deconstruction and intentional fallacy. It seems that Shobha De has a striking affinity with the vamp group of feminist authors with special reference to her novel *Starry Nights*. 