

Impact of Metropolitan Culture on Marriage: A Study on Dé's Select Texts

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Abstract:

Shobhaa Dé, an advocate of Feminism in her writing, portrays her female protagonists assertively, utilizing the narrative to underscore her argument that the personal realm transcends mere privacy and holds political significance. These central characters in her literary works emerge as outspoken critics challenging societal norms and regulations. They deviate from the conventional mold of women who tolerate abusive, unsatisfactory, or discomforting relationships across various dimensions, be it male dominance, objectification, sexual discontent, passion, or other facets. Breaking the silence surrounding these issues, they reject the notion of it being a taboo. In contrast, Dé refrains from depicting male characters as outright villains; instead, she subtly reveals that they are shaped by the patriarchal constructs evident in the storyline. The gender issues explored in her works extend beyond the realm of female oppression within domestic violence scenarios. Rather, they delve into the unspoken void of sexual dissatisfaction experienced by all female characters. While male characters traditionally bear roles associated with sexual prowess, power, and a distinct self-identity, the female figures in Dé's narratives defy these stereotypical molds. They serve as representations of women, asserting their agency by expressing sexual desires, wielding power, and yearning for a sense of self-identity. Consequently, this research centers on Shobhaa Dé's novels, namely *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Sisters* (1992), *Starry Nights* (1991), and *Second Thoughts* (1996), all of which grapple with gender-related themes. The study not only scrutinizes the challenges and issues presented but also illuminates the struggles faced by the protagonists in their quest for self-identity.

Keywords: Gender Issues, Privacy, Identity, Subjectivity, Quest.

The discourse surrounding the subjugation and suffering of women has been a prominent subject in the realm of gender issues. It is imperative to delve into the genesis and implementation of objectification to gain a comprehensive understanding of why women are objectified. The perpetuation of a hierarchy between men and women manifests in two extremes. The home ritual hierarchy reserves entitlement solely for men, with women having no access; they are expected not to be forthright, private, or deviate from societal expectations. At the social level, women are denied equal political, educational, and economic positions compared to males. The impact of cultural oppression on women, especially within the confines of their homes, becomes evident as it restricts their physical and mental capabilities. This form of subjugation is significantly more dehumanizing than economic exploitation, a misconception often mistakenly perceived as the prevailing issue. Consequently, the primary motivation behind this framework is to deny subjectivity and objectify women to perpetuate the patriarchal structure. The concepts of gender and gendering are intricately linked to the denial of subjectivity in all aspects.

Shobhaa Dé's works illustrate how personal and emotional space holds greater significance for women than economic independence. The majority of her heroines, despite belonging to the upper class and enjoying economic freedom, grapple with gender challenges on personal grounds in their pursuit of self-identity, emotional fulfillment, and sexual comfort. Gender is socially constructed, reflecting factors such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, social class, physical ability, and age. However, acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual is crucial, as some men are more emotional, some women wield more power and success, and gender relations are complex and evolving in various directions.

In her literary endeavors, Shobhaa Dé endeavors to depict human relations through the prisms of gender, personal desires, and voids. As a writer, she not only brings attention to the gender construction in society but also portrays the endeavors of her female protagonists to emancipate themselves from such constraints. These women defy stereotypical portrayals, standing up for themselves, exploring their sexuality, and striving to establish a profound connection with their bodies during their rebellious paths. They choose to be representatives of difference rather than succumbing to generalizations about women and their qualities. Shobhaa Dé's four novels—*Socialite Evenings*, *Sisters*, *Starry Nights*, and *Second Thoughts*—offer a nuanced portrayal of distinct female characters. Through these narratives, Shobhaa Dé, as a feminist, communicates that each woman is unique and possesses distinctive experiences. The novels not only provide

insights into the lives of diverse women but also illuminate the challenges they confront in their daily lives, emphasizing their relentless struggle to attain self-identity across various dimensions.

In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna, an upper-class woman of courage and financial independence, challenges societal norms by engaging in both pre-marital and extra-marital affairs in her pursuit of respect and decency. Despite her financial security, she yearns for emotional and sexual comfort, ultimately attaining self-realization. The protagonist's evolution unfolds in a bildungsroman style, navigating a tumultuous marriage where her feelings and interests are dismissed by her controlling husband. In *Sisters*, the narrative explores the contrasting lives of Mallika, an emotionally mature and financially independent woman, and Alisha, her emotional, naive half-sister seeking revenge. Mallika desires freedom despite her financial independence, while Alisha, despite leading a self-sufficient life, lacks life experiences. The plot delves into their journeys through society and relationships, emphasizing the realization that sisterhood fosters emotional and financial independence.

Starry Nights depicts Aasha Rani, a renowned film star exploited by various entities, including her mother, producers and actors. Aasha Rani's discovery of her homosexuality leads to a transformation from Viji to reclaim dignity and subjectivity. The narrative underscores her quest for respect beyond fame and financial security. In the novel *Second Thoughts*, Maya, a middle-class woman, aspires to a sophisticated lifestyle through marriage to a well-educated man. However, her dreams turn traumatic, leading her to seek emotional support and self-respect through an adulterous romance, highlighting the exploitation she faces from both husband and lover. Karuna's bold self-exploration, as portrayed in *Socialite Evenings*, marks a departure from societal expectations regarding women's private lives. Unlike Maya, who endures a rebellious marriage, Karuna rejects societal norms and engages in pre-marital and extramarital affairs without considering them taboo. This unique portrayal underscores the importance of women's private concerns, which generates more mental anguish than public arena rejection. Karuna's refusal to address her spouse by name symbolizes her struggle for autonomy within a formal relationship.

She not only expressed her discontent with the marriage due to mistreatment but also engaged in an extramarital affair with her husband's acquaintance. Post-divorce, she sought odd jobs to preserve her financial independence, steadfastly refusing to compromise in her quest for self-respect—a principle that, unfortunately, contributed to challenges in subsequent relationships. Ultimately, she gained self-awareness, recognizing that solitude provided both financial and emotional comfort. Her perspective contends that marriage should transcend being merely a source of financial support or security for women; it should also offer a sanctuary that respects and addresses women's needs. In Shobhaa Dé's *Sisters*, the importance of forging sisterhood among women is underscored amidst diverse challenges. Mallika and Alisha, Mallika's half-sister, initially faced estrangement due to differing situations and challenges. However, they later realized that, despite disparities, they could stand together to offer mutual moral support. Mallika, an international graduate returning to India after her parents' death, discovered her father's secret connection with Alisha's mother, making them half-sisters. Entrusted with managing her parents' corporate affairs, Mallika faced resistance and gender biases from men in her company. Ramankaka, a vocal opponent, epitomized societal expectations for women, urging Mallika to prioritize marriage over a career. Mallika, boldly confronting these challenges in the public arena, asserted her determination to challenge prejudices and assert her autonomy.

Mallika's gender challenges persisted after marriage, impeding her ability to run her business independently. Attempting to fill the void in her life by persuading her husband proved futile, leading her, out of undying love, to succumb to the comforting effects of alcohol. Importantly, she refused to be a woman sacrificing her life for love, recognizing that love is a part of life, not life itself. Subjectivity and respectability held equal importance in a woman's personal and social life. Alisha, self-reliant, developed disdain for Mallika due to external manipulations, rebelling alongside Mallika to forge her own identity. Mallika, consistently determined to reintegrate her half-sister into her life, faced two-dimensional gender challenges—one involving workplace biases and another confronting gender issues as an illegitimate daughter despite financial stability. Following her marriage, Mallika grapples with gender challenges despite being an autonomous woman, encountering restrictions in running her own business. The void in her life prompts attempts to persuade her husband, but these efforts prove futile. Driven by an enduring love for her spouse, Mallika succumbs to the solace of alcohol. Importantly, she distinguishes herself as a woman unwilling to sacrifice her life for love, understanding that love is an integral facet of life, not its entirety. Subjectivity and respectability assume equal importance in both personal and social dimensions of a woman's life. Conversely, Alisha, self-sufficient and shaped by external manipulations, harbors a disdain for Mallika, opting to rebel alongside her half-sister in pursuit of self-identity. Mallika remains resolute in her commitment to reintegrate Alisha into her life. Thus, Shobhaa Dé introduces a two-dimensional portrayal of gender challenges—one navigating workplace biases and another grappling with gender issues as an illicit daughter despite financial stability.

Shobhaa Dé fearlessly addresses gender concerns in the public sphere, notably in *Starry Nights*. The protagonist, Viji, faces exploitation due to her impoverished background, compelled to partake in adult films for financial survival.

Striving to become a Bollywood actress, she confronts the necessity of compromising with male producers and actors. Despite her attempts to break free from gender constraints, she finds herself ensnared in exploitation. To counteract male exploitation, Viji strategically exploits their vulnerabilities. Dé has candidly depicted sex and gender issues. *Starry Nights* garnered attention for its unreserved portrayal of sex and exploitation, offering a candid depiction of the Mumbai film industry's glitz, deceit, and exploitation of women. Aasha Rani, the protagonist, manipulates men across various echelons, ranging from assistant producers to influential underworld figures and industrialists. Aasha Rani adeptly employs the strategy of beating men at their own game throughout the novel, showcasing the power dynamics at play. Kishenbhai was her godfather but, "His Aasha. She was no longer his, of course, he corrected himself swiftly. But she had been. And her rise to fame had begun in this very theatre. It was an event he would never forget. His first film. And hers. His premier hit. And hers. His first love. And hers?" (SN, 1). Aasha Rani thanklessly forgot Kishenbhai's efforts, "Kishenbhai had made sure, Aasha Rani's debut didn't go unnoticed. He had celebrated her triumph—with a vengeance. What a *shandar* party he had thrown for her. Everybody had come to it" (SN, 13). But Aasha Rani moved on to other men for using them.

In the quest for self-identity, Aasha Rani unveils a profound gender issue, she realizes of being a lesbian. "Linda demanded gruffly, moving over her, rubbing herself against her, till both of them came together, shuddering and shaking, not wanting it to end. Aasha Rani collapsed with Linda over her. For a while they didn't say anything to each other" (SN, 108). This revelation, deeply ingrained in her unconscious self, had been suppressed by societal and maternal expectations, which confined her to a heterosexual relationship. Shobhaa Dé's narrative explores the intricacies of gender, sexuality, and the suppression of one's true identity. In *Second Thoughts*, Shobhaa Dé vividly portrays the deeply entrenched traditional gender norms in India, exemplified through Maya's struggle for autonomy in a stifling environment. Despite her aspirations to lead a cosmopolitan life and pursue a career, Maya faces severe restrictions within her in-laws' household. The prevailing custom, enforced in numerous households, involves curbing a woman's freedom to seek employment, perpetuating gender hierarchies. The inhibition stems from the fear that her exposure to society through employment might empower her, challenging established gender structures. This practice, favoring men over women, contributes to the psychological distress endured by women within their homes.

Dé diverges from conventional gender issues like dowry in her narrative, focusing on Maya's quest for self-empowerment. Maya's uncle, representing conservative perspectives, asserts, in an Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows. Ranjan, despite being an American University graduate, aligns with orthodox views, asserting, it's a woman's duty to run a good home. The impact extends beyond Maya's professional aspirations, permeating her emotional and physical well-being. Ranjan, driven by ambition and a work-centric approach, denies her sexual satisfaction, dismissing her needs callously. His insensitive remark, "Are you that sex-starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex be being so important to anybody, I've never understood" (ST, 281), adds to her emotional distress. Nikhil emerges as a contrasting figure, offering Maya the understanding and space she craves. He becomes the embodiment of her idealized husband, fulfilling her unmet desires. Maya's yearning for a gratifying physical and emotional relationship is palpable in her feelings for Nikhil, "Every bit of me was suddenly alive to the feel of Nikhil's lips, hands, arms, neck, chest, knees, and legs. An unknown recklessness started to sweep over me" (ST, 293). This nuanced depiction of a woman's yearning for fulfillment in a relationship, seldom candidly explored by authors, underscores Dé's commitment to unveiling authentic gender challenges.

Shobhaa Dé, like Kamala Das, stands out for her conscious efforts to shed light on the genuine gender struggles women face in both private and public spheres. While some writers may inadvertently cater to the male gaze, Dé, through works like *Second Thoughts*, remains dedicated to presenting the unfiltered reality of women's experiences. Shobhaa Dé's female characters hail from diverse backgrounds, each grappling with unique challenges in their pursuit of self-identity and respect. Dé meticulously crafts characters with distinct backgrounds and experiences, highlighting that gender issues resist generalization. Despite feminists uniting for collective protest, their issues and encounters remain diverse. Through characters like Karuna, navigating gender complexities in her relationships despite being married and independent, or Maya, grappling with the emotional void in her married life and a lack of support from her husband, Dé illustrates the multifaceted nature of women's experiences. Characters such as Aasha face gender challenges in the film industry, while Alisha and Mallika contend with gender issues both at home and in the workplace. Despite her Indian heritage, Shobhaa Dé emerges as an outspoken writer, presenting gender issues comprehensively to expose the denial of subjectivity for women. She adeptly portrays the uniqueness of women's struggles, challenging the tendency to homogenize women and their problems within contemporary feminist discourse.

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