



LESBIANISM: A THREAT TO MALE HEGEMONY IN SHOBHA DE'S FICTION

RICHA

Lecturer in English, GSSS Bakheta, Rohtak, Haryana, India



RICHA

ABSTRACT

A woman always scarifies her voice, intellect and personal development in a relationship with man. But new women in the novels of Shobha De challenge the male hegemony and hence they reject compulsory heterosexuality and suggest woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to woman relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. It is a revolt of women against the patriarchal society and its norms which underrate women. It has been suggested through De's novels that a woman can work up another woman better than a man. The present article describes lesbian relations of De's women in order to get rid of their rigid and orthodox marital frame work which has been imposed on them through ages.

Keywords: Lesbianism, Relationship, Hegemony

Article Info:

Article Received: 16/08/2013

Revised on: 22/08/2013

Accepted: 24/08/2013

INTRODUCTION

The word lesbianism is derived from the Greek word "Lesbhos", a Greek island in the Aegean Sea which was the native place of Sappho, the 7th Century B.C. lyric poetess who addressed her love poems to women (Pandeya, 201). In the *Kamasutra*, the famous classic of Hindu erotica, there is a clear mention of lesbianism. Today lesbianism is a universal phenomenon where women find sexual fulfillment among themselves. It has been increasing in the conservative Indian society despite the society's lack of recognition to this practice. Reason being a woman can work up another woman better than a man; whereas a man performs and after doing it he become indifferent to his female partner or show lack of care for her. Another reason can be the revolt of the women against the society and its norms which underrate women. Lesbian relationship is more prominently seen among the upper rich classes.

In a recent survey a woman gives the following reasons for her lesbian preferences: it is much easier to give in conditionally to a woman, to surrender ego; her skin is soft and smooth, "no worry whether my body is adequate; no worry about the partner's sexual moral judgment, where I was going to be placed on the spectrum of female frailties (angel or whore)" (Hite, 205-06). Here surrendering of ego is important, the implication being it is easier to surrender before one's own sex than to the males who already rules, exploits and dominates the female. Tender approach is an important thing in this behaviour. This preference is also because of different kinds of psychic rapport between women not to be found in heterosexual relationship in which a woman's role is inferior. She is rode over by the male. She is made love to, not made love with (205-06). And herein comes of another facet of lesbian behaviour-that is realizing

independence from the male which is another important principle of feminism.

From the ages women always have a secondary status. In the name of tradition and moral values women have been habituated to restrain their sexual desires leading to inequality in terms of sexual freedom. Because of conditioning by family and society, many women have false beliefs about sex which leads to sexual incompatibility and unhappiness in marriage. Many women believe that a woman is complete if she is connected to a man. This is what Toril Moi illustrates in the essay "Feminism Literary Criticism" (104) by defining the term phallogocentrism, which denotes a system where phallus is the prime symbol or source of power. She also explains another term Logocentrism which in cahoots with phallogocentrism is actually an effort to repress and make women silent. But Shobha De's women do not meekly follow traditional guidelines.

An alliance with a man grants a woman heterosexual privileges, many of which are redefined by the law; religion and families. But, the woman has to pay its price at her own cost, since she has to destroy herself, her voice, intellect, and personal development, for a man's need, in these alliances. Thus, Shobha De rejects compulsory heterosexuality and suggests woman to woman relation or lesbianism is better than man to woman relationship, which she has depicted in her novels. She also refuses to participate in the game of competition for man. She confronts her own sexuality and challenges the norms placed upon her by culture or society. Moreover, in refusing to the ideal pattern of behaviour, these lesbians are a threat for patriarchal dictates of ownership, thereby threatening to destabilize the system by usurping male privilege. Thus, homosexuality is seen as a challenge to male hegemony.

DISCUSSION

Shobha De is a writer with feminist leanings. Shobha De's women are the new woman who shatter the age-old concept of the traditional Indian woman with their assertive, individualistic and carefree attitude towards life. In this new image the new women have got extreme independence in almost every field and one of the most striking and freedoms they enjoy is

sexual freedom. No longer is the new woman is dependent on man for her sexual fulfillment. De has made a bold and innovative attempt to portray heterosexual relationships.

In one of the novel *Snapshots* it appears that her women very wisely use sex to fight their battle against patriarchy. As Rashmi comments that mediocre women use "sex as bait but the shrewd women hold their men and keep them enslaved." (49) This psychology definitely reduces man's power over women. Modern, urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women of Shobha De have transformed themselves from commodities to identities. De very skillfully demolishes the archetypal image of man as the dominant gender and uncovers his Achilles' heel. Physical realities have deep significance for De and she, by asserting woman's sexual supremacy again alters the norm. Through her novels, De seeks to establish the fact that a woman has the same feelings, passions, aspirations and values as a man has and she is determined to fight it out for realizing her dreams.

Men always considers themselves masters and therefore to satisfy women's sexual needs they many a time, exploits them sexually and emotionally. But Shobha De's women have learnt the art of satisfying their needs by themselves and thus they are free from man-mania. When Aparna considers the ugliest sight in the world is of a man with an erection, Balbir comments that he always thought that perhaps women like the sight of "ready to action cock" (*Snapshots*, 226). Listening this Aparna snorted, "Women are so self-sufficient, men can't bear it. That's what gets them. Nobody is cock-slave" (226).

Thus, due to strong hatred or rejection of men's domination and superiority in the society or having received no love and understanding in the surroundings in which they live, women by their psychological and biological needs are inclined to take to lesbianism as in De's *Strange Obsession*, where the entire story revolves around lesbianism with the two leading characters i.e. Amrita and Minx sharing this highly resentful relationship.

In childhood Minx had sex with her father and this makes her psychological sick. She develops hatred for

her own father and every man. She becomes a lesbian and forcefully falls on an upcoming model-Amrita. On the contrary Amrita goes close to Minx as the latter fulfills most of her needs—a good house and somebody taking care of her finances. The only thing she is unable to get from their relationship is a child. Thus the new woman's seeking for fulfillment even within her own sex is seen clearly in the women of De. These new women show a desire to prove that they may not need to depend on man's company. Minx is so headstrong to win her love that she even undergoes surgery to remove her breasts. She somehow wants to please Amrita. For Minx, lesbianism was a result of hatred and fear of deception from men. It was a revolt against society and norms laid down to under-rate-women. By belonging to Amrita, protecting and helping her, she posed a great threat to male. Thus, in *Strange Obsession* Shobha De treats the subject of sex elaborately; the sadistic homosexual tendencies of Minx shows the threat to male hegemony.

Lesbianism is a socially unaccepted behaviour right from the early history, many people don't like it because it is a different thing. In treatise on statecraft and penology, *Manusmriti*, punishment is given for spoiling a young girl through lesbian contact, mutual sexual gratification. But the more important question is why lesbian behaviour and this takes us beyond the physicality of it. The answer is to be found more in woman's psyche than in her body, not that the body is any less important. One knows that among the humans sexuality is not only confined to the genitalia, it is in the mind, the genitalia are only the medium. That is why it is also called the tool. In lesbian relationship physicality is a part of the greater emotional relationship. In *Starry Nights* when Linda says, "let me do to you what no man could have done" (65) she is not exaggerating for the simple reason that man can never be woman either in sexual advances or in his body. Man in order to be macho is always harsh and rough in approach, not that violence has a place in *ars amatoria*, and his body can never be soft like a woman's. And therein lays the difference.

In the context of *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani is certainly not very happy with male and his exploitation. Even the only man whom she really loves, Akshay Kumar,

cannot treat her better than a kept since he is married. Thus she challenges, "All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all-beat you at your own game!" (8) Aasha Rani's tormented soul is soothed only by her relations with women, be it Thai girls or the *Showbiz* reporter Linda. Aasha undergoes never to be forgotten thrill of the female flesh from the Thai girls. It is the heavenly gift:

It was an experience, so sensuous, so arousing, so complete, that it was weeks before she couldn't forget the feel of two, smooth, soft, oiled, practically breastless bodies on either side of her, touching, licking, stroking every naked inch, making her skin tingle and come alive in a way she couldn't have imagined possible (66).

She experiences "the greatest orgasm of her life" (66). The same multi-sensory experience she is entertained by Linda. Linda evinces that she can perform like a purusha. Of course she insists, "THIS is love, understand? This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our bodies" (80). She exposes new skylines for Aasha. Her lesbian affair with Linda leaves such a powerful impact on her mind that she is not able to forget it and as observed above, "It could never be with a man" (82). What Aasha Rani finally concludes after this sexual experience was that, what she and Linda shared was completely normal and rightful. She had several sexual experiences with men but they were always one-sided. She only offered her body to those men and they had used her body thinking only of their own pleasure and caring little or not at all about what she must be feeling by their wild, brutal assaulting type of sexual behaviour. Aasha Rani never enjoyed those experiences. She only had done it automatically almost like a daily choir. With Linda, she had experienced full pleasure and complete ecstasy. She felt nothing dirty about the fact that she was having sex with someone from her own sex. She loved it and felt greatly satisfied.

This feeling of hers personifies another quality of the image of new woman who wants everything she experiences to be worthwhile and satisfactory. What Linda and Aasha Rani did is nothing unnatural to the new type of woman who feels that sex with a woman

is much more satisfying than with a man who leaves her all hurt and dirty after having satisfied himself with hardly a second thought whether a woman had enjoyed the act or not. So lesbianism is also a part of the revolting spirit inside the new woman. They seem to be all out to satisfy every female urge and wish even if it be the sexual one to be fulfilled within their own sex. On a deeper level of woman's consciousness this experience also implies independence from man.

In *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani is a revolt against the patriarchal traditional set up of our society, which allows the sexual relationship of only the heterosexual kind. In man-woman relationship, it is usually the man who has an upper hand. Most women have no guts to voice or reacts to their partner's feeling of fulfillment in sexual pleasure. But through lesbianism woman gives a vibrant jolt and denounces man as unimportant even on the sexual front. Thus one can conclude that De's women consider lesbian relationships better than heterosexual relationships.

Sultry Days is another example of lesbian behaviour. In *Sultry Days*, Feroze is another young woman flouting the convention: "Enterprising, manipulative and full of strange kind of charm, she got around to places most people only dreamt of (149-150)." And lesbian as she is, Feroze ultimately marries Kiki.

Overnight Feroze had become household name all over India. Her photographs with Kiki were splashed everywhere - laughing, kissing, holding hands, relaxing. One magazine had gone to the extent of screaming - Wedding bells for the industry's first lesbian couple... (152).

In lesbian affairs one of the lesbian partners may assume active part, called butch, as Linda and Minx, yet in such relationship there is mutuality not duality as observed by Simone de Beauvoir:

Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to recreate the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality (Beauvoir, 155).

It is important here to mention here that as per a judgment delivered by Delhi High Court, private consensual sex between adults of same sex is not to be considered a criminal activity anymore. With this India becomes one of the several other countries to take the guilt out of homosexuality. Following the judgment, Delhi's LGBT (LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL and TRANSGENDER) community gathered at Jantar Mantar to celebrate with cries of 'Jai Ho, Gay Ho'.

CONCLUSION

Thus one can conclude that lesbianism in De's novels is a part of the new rebellious woman who wants an equal footing with man. Linda and Aasha Rani, of *Starry Nights* Minx and Amrita of *Strange Obsession* are examples of the new woman who enjoy lesbianism more than heterosexual relationship. These women have self-determination which prompts them to pursue lesbianism and challenge male hegemony. De's depiction of explicit sex between women is a truthful picture of the new reality which is coming up fast in the modern world and its increasingly independent women folk who are throwing challenges to men in almost every spheres of human activity. Lesbianism, though a resentful term to discuss in our still conservative society, thus becomes a threat to male hegemony.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indeed thankful to my Research Guide Prof. Gulab Chillar, Dept of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Women's University Khanpur Kala, Sonapat, Haryana, India for his invaluable guidance at every step.

REFERENCES

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex* (Le Deuxieme Sexe 1949) Paris, Trans, and Ed. H.M.Parshley. London: Picador, 1988.
- De, Shobha. *Starry Nights*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1991.
- . *Strange Obsession*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992.
- . *Sultry Days*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1994.
- . *Snapshots*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1995.
- Hite, Shere. *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality*. New York: Dell, 1987.
- Moi, Toril. "Feminist Female, Feminine." *The Feminist Reader*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Wiley-Blackwell, 1977.

Pandeya, Prabhat Kumar. "Tender, Beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in *Starry Nights*." *The Fiction of Shobha De*, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000.
