

Corporate World: A Feminist Study with Reference to Shobha De's Novels

Ms. Deepanjali Mishra

Bhubaneswar.

Women's contribution to work was started way back during the First World War when they represented and worked alongside men and actively participated in rendering their services to the country. Not only they performed their work wholeheartedly, but they were also applauded by everyone for their dedicated service. The entry of women into the professional world was seen as a threat to the patriarchal system who opined that a woman should render her service to the society as a wife, mother or a daughter. If they indulged in coming out of their house and working outside, they would never be able to do justice to their role. In an attempt to stop them from going to work, they were alleged with immoralities and thereby posing threat to the stable family lives. This was one of the major reasons for the rise of Feminist Movement.

Feminism is a movement which advocated for establishing and defending equal rights for women. It aims at providing political, economic and social rights to them. The activists who fight for these rights are called as feminists. They have campaigned tirelessly for women's rights in the field of contracts, property, voting rights and also reproductive rights. The Feminist Movement opposed domestic violence, sexual harassment etc. Feminists have fought for providing workplace rights which included providing equal pay package and opportunities for enhancing their careers to be successful entrepreneurs.

Shobha De is a writer who has actively participated in Feminist Movement without being called herself as a feminist. She says wisely:

"I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag"

The role of women is undergoing a massive dramatic change worldwide. Women today have succeeded in sharing podium alongside men in almost all fields. Women have joined hands to hands in becoming team leaders, CEO's, managers in the corporate world. However, the number of women in managerial positions is still alarmingly low which may be due to various factors. For example, women find it more comfortable to stick to their roles as homemaker and for this reason they are ready to quit their jobs if it's the demand of their family. Secondly, maternity leave also poses another reason for their discontinuity in their jobs. As a result of which very few women succeed in getting the top positions in the corporate world.

Shobha De writes mostly about urban elite women and has effectively highlighted their problems. She has got the mind with the sharpness of an eagle which has captured the plight of women in corporate world. Shobha De has vehemently opposed the gender discrimination in workplace and has advocated for equivalence of power shared between both men and women.

New Indian women who have already attained economic independence are a breed apart from others. They enjoy economic independence and their attitude is characterized by a rare seriousness. In Blogspot.com's article, *Independent Woman, What a Laugh*, dated Aug 24th, 2010, she wrote, "Our conversation was restricted to children, cooking and maids. (all these were declared hazardous to health, more so than cigars and booze) She further writes that this conversation was not between bored or pampered housewives, but it was between first class corporate professionals who earned approximately same, if not more than their husbands. Still they were cribbing about traditional household domestic issues that belonged to their grandmother's era."

According to Shobha De, women in business are not given much importance even though they wore business suits to their workplace and carried burgundy coloured brief cases and they took their jobs on earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity by men. In fact work interests for women have become fashionable.

A working woman, who hails from middle class background but now has got a job in corporate sector can surrender her pay packet to her mother-in-law and feel guilty about the smallest personal expenses that she does without telling her family. Yet her observation is Shakti is destructive as well a creative force and the maintenance of equilibrium between the low opposing forces can lead to creative and dynamic harmony. Shobha De has stated in *Shooting From the Hip* "The very concept of the sexes locked in external battle is negative and destructive." She makes this interesting and truthful remark that there will be complacent, placed woman and a freak, docile man, the quarrel is not to reach the top of the human heap, and stay there but about the race being run in fair terms and without weighted handicaps".

Socialite Evenings gives us the picture of marginalization of Indian working woman at the hands of their husbands. The heroines of Shobha De's novels are not only protagonists, but they are also the monetary contributors to their family as well as in the society, who initiates and regulates their own lives as well as the lives of others. Such is Karuna's (*Socialite Evenings*) confidence over Work and this is Shobha De's attitude for Work.

The writer is genuine enough to reason out that women need not depend on anyone for their luxuries. Shobha De's novels are inhabited by high class working women professionals who are not at all sensitive in their emotions and thoughts. They are very much interested to gain materialistic benefits like solitaires, cars, clothes for which they know that they need to earn money and are quite well aware of their own economic independence instead of asking their husbands or boyfriends to pay for these materialistic demands.

Shobha De has very sensibly stated in *Surviving Men* in this way:

"Yes, we know money is power. The person who controls the purse strings plays grand puppeteer. If the wife is wealthier, she is the one who makes her husband beg for pocket-money." (*Surviving Men*: p-XVIII)

Eventually everything is arrived at activating power, fame, and money i.e. the materialistic gains. Women can't be independent unless they are economically self sufficient.

A woman needs to be financially sound, she should then only be able to assert her dominance in any field, be it Industry, films, corporate sector etc. In this way she won't be dependent on any of her male counterparts whether it's her husband or her brother. An independent mind is meaningless if the body and soul is in the custody of someone else.

According to Shobha De, corporate women suffer from both sides without knowing how to react. If they give time for their career, they are charged of being a 'hardcore'. If they ask for some liberty in timing, they are accused of being too demanding by their bosses and if they give up their career to focus on their family, husbands and children, their husbands totally object about their wives hanging around at home and enjoying all the perks while contributing nothing to the family's income. Women accept that if they give up their job and concentrate on their family, they are openly criticized by their husbands and sometimes their in-laws instead of being appreciated for their gratitude.

Shobha De was at a seminar which was meant for addressing issues faced by women professionals, many working women voiced disappointment at their husbands' indifference attitude towards their wives. They expect women to please their mothers, look after their kids, manage all the household work and at the same time contribute to the family's income. They

have to postpone having babies because they are not sure their job will be intact after their maternity leave as they fear another female colleague who is single, would take over the temporarily vacated post and they are thrown away from their jobs. Sometimes they are forced to work under a junior colleague after resuming their duties from their maternity leave and they find that all their years of work have gone waste.

Men want a dynamo draped in sexy couture- as Shobha De calls it. Men want their women to be smart enough to handle their business as well, be good and nice in cutting their deals. She says that family needs extra income, and men alone can't cope up with it so the pressure on working women mounts up to a large extent. She has to be indeed a superwoman to handle all these works at the same time.

Shobha De's ideology of working women is very closely related to Vivekananda who believe that women were far more sufficient and not merely anatomical showpieces or coveted objects protected and confined within four walls of homes or emotional windbags likely to be deflected at the slightest prick. Vivekananda considered women as manifestation of protection, source of power, sustaining humanity with characteristic chain and dignity. De rejects sexual discrimination and gives her women dignity and individuality that's justifiably deserved by them.

The novel *Sisters* by Shobha De deals with the struggle that a woman, Mallika has to face after she got a chance to run a business empire that she had acquired by chance after the sudden demise of her father. She faced stiff oppositions from her own employees like Ramankaka who always tried to make things difficult for her. *Sisters* deals with a woman's struggle for identity in a male dominated society. After her father Seth Hiralal's death Mallika found that loans were as high as 80 crores, licenses were acquired under mysterious situations. Mallika tries to reform herself to be a much matured woman and face the world after her parents' death. She behaves in a very calm way not in haste for giving decisions to her employees. She chooses her business attire very carefully which included her accessories as well. She becomes responsible and tries not to fall into any kind of trap. Like most of Shobha De's women characters, Mallika takes company's decisions by herself without taking anybody's help. One such example is to include Shanay, her cousin in her company despite vehement oppositions from Ramnabhai. She showed her industrial capability by appointing him because he was very faithful and trustworthy as well as sincere. She knew that Shanay was madly in love with him and he would leave no stone unturned to please him at any cost. To induct him meant she would own his sincerity and faithfulness. She got what she wanted when Shanay showed her a report which indicated that Seth Hiralal was murdered. The writer Shobha De has portrayed a serious, matured, committed and a workaholic character in Mallika Hiralal in *Sisters*. Ramankaka suggested her that he should be consulted in all her decisions about business transactions, but its Mikki who holds the key to decisions because she knows that 'the corporate world is full of sharks' and gets victory when she declares:

"Thank you for your advice, Ramankaka. I appreciate and value your words. But I'd like you to have few of mine now. I can't change my sex, unfortunately..... but can change most about everything else.... And I intend to..... this is going to be my show and I intend running it on my own terms." (p-430)

She isn't emotional, subdued and weak personality as far as professionalism is concerned. Rather she is intelligent and confident. She breaks off her engagement with Naveen immediately without giving a second thought when talks fail in a meeting related to the takeover of her industry which was in great financial crisis.

Shobha De believes that Indian women have changed quantitatively. They are a part of the modern world and are ready for the new millennium. If a woman is self sufficient, she hardly bothers about getting married and leading a life being dominated by the patriarchal system. She is bold, daring and ambitious. In *Shooting from the Hip*, De writes: "The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent terms. If a self sufficient woman with a roof over has chosen to marry, its' because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a life- long ticket. Divorce too has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere to go."

Even though the emerging class of working women has acquired the long denied respect, prestige, and also freedom, yet Indian women face certain problems arising out of their dual responsibilities. The entire earning is accepted, no doubt, but the change in life pattern is not welcomed too eagerly by the family members. The household responsibilities are still considered as the duty of the women. As a result majority of working women in Shobha De's novels face adjustment problem. This idea of the writer is clearly mentioned in *Surviving Men* where she writes:

"I bring as much money as he does. I work equally for long hours. I hate when he offers me to fix dinner. What does he mean by 'help'? Its such a presumptuous word. It indicates that he has assumed making dinner is solely my responsibility.....and he is being kind enough to share some of it with me. I Bullshit. We both have to feed ourselves. As far as I am concerned, he does his bit 8 and I do mine. It's a joint effort. No favors" (*Surviving Men*: XVIII, 1997)

The popularity of the novels of Shobha De is her own way of saying men to watch out. Women are not those who can only sit at home. They can also acquire name, fame and status like men. Her women are highly challenging, educated and assertive. They go in for high flying career like modeling, high power business, journalism and advertising. They can keep a string of men tied under their belt so that when one fails to live up to their expectations, they can move on to the next. The novels mainly deal with the urban women with metropolis as the setup, their challenges. Predicament, values and lifestyle.

In *Socialite Evenings*, the protagonist, Karuna had an early marriage and gets a divorce because she gets bored with the life of a housewife. She did her first modeling for a newspaper and got a tight slap from her conservative father but that slap didn't stop her from continuing with her further modeling assignments. She feels very sad when she was being left out of all the conversations between her husband and her mother-in-law. Karuna realizes that a Indian woman's life is an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left.(P-65)

The protagonist in this novel, Karuna believes in I am the good thing attitude. Here 'I' is a good thing because it can be dressed up and presented as an extremely marketable product over the media. Karuna tries to show how Indian women are made to tolerate and denied to live as an individual. This is clarified when she speaks:

"I am made to feel obliged and in debt. It's awful but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house has become a battleground." (P-69)

She goes on to win the Ad club award for the ensuing year. She prefers to be a free lance Ad writer with freedom. She starts making ad films as well as succeeds in becoming a modern Independent woman. This was indeed her dream of achieving professional success. The writer has depicted Karuna as a very capable woman who is strong enough to circumvent her lot in life and launch into the kind of lifestyle of modeling which is still not acceptable with orthodox

Indian families. Karuna becomes financially self dependent, craves her own niche in the professional and competitive world of advertising thereby asserting her independence.

It is highly significant that Shobha De's novels deal with Indian woman's challenges, predicament, values and lifestyle. She has independent thoughts with a very independent mind. She thinks no matter if a woman is married, or in a very steady relationship, yet she needs to be financially independent. At least she should be able to earn for herself and for this education is a must. A woman should have minimum education to earn a living and prevent herself from being exploited in the hands of men.

Corporate world according to Shobha De is rich, powerful and self-centered. A woman has to struggle on her own without anybody's help to climb the ladder of success.

Aparna in 'Snapshots' is a corporate woman who is the owner of an ad agency employing many people in her industry. She had to face stiff opposition from her outside and even her husband deserted her at the most crucial time when she needed him the most. Even then she stood up and faced all odds bravely. She had clever employees like Prem who knew how to get things done from her which she tells him on his face while they were on a pleasure trip to the beaches of Goa:

"You work for me because I pay you top dollar. More than your market value. Let's face it- you've priced yourself out of the job bazaar" (p-2, *Snapshots*).

Aparna was a very headstrong woman who knew how to handle employees like Prem. However she was completely a different person when it came to love and marriage.

Aparna in *Snapshots* had married Rohit because they had many things in common. Both loved sporting long hair, jeans and kurtis, and even they shared same star sign- Gemini. However things changed drastically after marriage with frequent quarrels and it was Aparna who had to surrender meekly always to Rohit.

"He erred- she forgave. It was taken for granted that all differences were to be settled in just one way- his. And each time they fought, it was Aparna who was left feeling rotten and vaguely guilty as though the whole thing was somehow her fault; that it was her intensity that came in the way and spoilt everything; that it was she who expected too much; demanded too much; that men were supposed to be a hundred percent honest, or sincere; that it was unrealistic of her to hope for that with Rohit. Wives, she often heard were better off being somewhat different. Husbands preferred that to an obsessive interest in their lives." (*Snapshots*: p24-25)

Aparna loved Rohit maddeningly enough to leave him for a moment. She was asked not to put any questions on him by Rohit. He even told her to stop looking at her with a suspicious look. No interference in his matters, or no curiosity about what he was doing. She obeyed him and taught herself not to interfere or put any questions on him. She was a shattered woman by then running errands for him, getting drinks for him and his friends after setting the dinner table ready for them. Ultimately her marriage culminated and Rohit walked out of his life. Rohit left her with allegations that she was responsible for all the separation and she was finally deserted by Rohit.

The separation was too hard to bear for Aparna. She spent days after days, time after time thinking about where things could go wrong between them. Finally she thought that it was because Rohit didn't want to take the responsibilities of a family. Marriage was okay but when she wanted to have a baby, he was casual about the topic and said; 'Why do you want to spoil it all? This is perfect. I am enjoying life. I am busy. You are busy. Let's forget the kids.'

While portraying Aparna and Rohit's relationship, the writer Shobha De has spoken about the Indian prejudices still prevailing in the Indian culture which is completely male oriented and male dominated. Women are expected and taught to obey meekly to their husbands. They are made to dance to the tunes of their husbands without questioning. If they revolt, they would either be harassed, or tortured physically or mentally or deserted. This is elaborately depicted in the character of Aparna, who obliges, accepts willingly to all the terms and conditions and even the blames and the accusations and the allegations put forth by her husband. She concludes herself that maybe she had expected too much out of this marriage. Maybe she failed to give enough time to her home and her husband being a working woman.

Shobha De believes that life is very fast in cosmopolitan cities. With increase in career scopes and openings, women are employed in large number of IT and ITES sectors and corporate organizations. It's very easy to enter into a relationship with a colleague or someone else. As a result of their relationship, dating becomes a very common thing and an intimate physical relationship can't be ruled out between these couples. Everything is very fast and before giving themselves a chance to think about the other, they get married. However after marriage they expect the same coziness, passion, love, tenderness to be there from their respective partners always which can never happen. They remain in the fantasy world without coming to the reality or being realistic. This leads to constant fights, misunderstandings and finally separation from each other. This kind of relationship lacks empathy between the couples. After getting divorced, they are in search of a new boyfriend or a girlfriend. It takes no time to forget about their past affair, relationship or even marriage. Even if one is very serious or emotional, the other partner doesn't give him/her a chance of any kind of compromise.

Shobha De has talked of power game in the book *Spouse- the truth about marriage* where she has mentioned that the worst power game involved is the ego. She has categorically said that an egoist partner is an unpleasant partner. She may not be sexist, she has found man to be far more ego driven in a relationship compared to a woman. It's a traditionally accepted concept that women are taught to accept a subordinate position than man within marriage. Power has always rested with the husband and if the wife had a problem (even a genuine one) situation can be very bad and it can go to the extent of separation. But with change in time, women became financially independent, contributed equally or even more to the family income. In that situation, women refuse to surrender completely by prostrating themselves at their dear patidev's feet. There are also examples where the reverse is role has taken place like men looking after the home as home-maker and women going for work to earn a living for the two of them as well as the family. In this situation, women assert themselves and they try to play the role of the boss in the house which results in game becoming lethal because men don't want to change their role from boss to slave and very strong financially independent women refuse to accept the supremacy of their unemployed husbands. Most men like to consolidate their power at home and it's very unlikely that they share their power with their wife. They opine that "I'm the husband, the ultimate boss and I must be obeyed." However Shobha de suggests that there should be respect because respect is the foundation of every relationship and it can't be ruled out in a marriage as well but respect should be from both the sides. Each should respect the other no matter what is his or her financial status. A wife who constantly challenges her husband's authority in public exposes her own loop holes. It's absolutely not necessary that one should put one's life partner down to elevate one's status.

All women in every class of society face similar problems. Shobha De instills self confidence in the minds of women by advocating economic independence for them by which they can make themselves useful to the family and contribute to the family's income which could also be responsible in reducing the expectations to a great extent.

Once she spoke on an occasion of International Women's Day in Allahabad where she was invited as a guest speaker:

"Wine and Cigarettes don't make a modern woman. In the attitude that matters in the rest, to say the least are pseudo projections most unimpressive"

(Times of India, Lucknow, March 10th, 1999)

Conclusion:

Thus we see that women's contribution to the corporate world has been significantly improving and Shobha De has been successful enough to explore the feminist cause and her portrayal of the corporate world is worth noting. She has been very successful in highlighting the problems faced by them and their attitude towards work, family and marriage. Therefore she has emphasized upon the fact that women empowerment is a must for each and every woman and the women must stand up to fight for their cause and they shouldn't be discriminated on the basis of their sex.

Works Cited:

- De, Shobha. *Socialite Evenings*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 1990
- Shukla, Bhaskar. *Feminism and Female Writers*. New Delhi: Book Enclave, 2007
- Chintan Ambalal Mahid. *The Corrupt Urban Culture in Shobha De's Sisters*. Vol-1, Issue VI, July 2011
- De, Shobha. *Sisters*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 1992
- Geetha, B J. *The Whacky World of Spurious Affinity- An Appraisal with Reference to Shobha De's Sisters*
- Anand, Shdha Bhandari. *The Feminine Image In Fiction By Women*. Impressions, Vol I, Issue II, July 2007
- Amarnath, Nischinta, and Debashish Ghosh. *The Voyage to Excellence: The Ascent of 21 Women Leaders of India*, New Delhi: Pustak Mahal. 2005
- Thirugnanam, Jayalakshmi. *The status of Women Writers in India*. www.chillibreeze.com
- Anand, Anita. One Workplace, Two Experiences: Is Corporate India inhospitable to Women. www.indiatogether.com May 2002
- De, Shobha. *Snapshots*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 1995
- De, Shobha. *Shooting From The Hip*, New Delhi: UBS 1995