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Against Sexual Subalternity in Shobha De's Novels

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In order to avoid sexual exploitation or eroticization of women as mere a sex object, Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* advocates a society having a single standard of “sex freedom” (62) for men and women without which the equality between them will remain ephemeral. In our double-standard society if a man sleeps with many women he is called experienced whereas women, who have multi- sexual experience, are labeled as whores. This is degrading attitude towards women and makes her position subaltern in the society. The society with its existent culture voices shame upon a woman if she goes beyond the criteria of passivity and repression, in sexual acts. A woman is taught to suppress sexual desires and needs by conceding all pleasure to the male; even talking about participation and satisfaction in sex is taboo. Such treatment of society with women situates women under the category of subaltern on sexual biases.

The word subaltern was first employed as a British military term. Subaltern person is one who is of junior-grade; inferior in rank or status; the junior faculty; a lowly corporal. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, under the influence of Marxism, nationalism, post colonialist theory and feminism, subaltern has come to be used broadly to represent subordination in social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies. Diverse aspects of societies, histories, and other human situations have been examined at the national, communal, and individual levels to recover the roles of marginalized or subaltern participants displaced by stratification. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist, prominent socialist, provided the intellectual impetus for transforming the notion of subaltern into a political and social concept through his writings. He wrote of workers in Europe as belonging to classes that had been subordinated through socio-political hegemony, were exploited through economic methods, and were excluded from meaningful participation in the offices and benefits of the nation.

Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and various other writers, have suggested that attempts to reconstruct past events that is, the process of historiography that produces the historical accounts is inextricably bound with and constantly reflects the impact of interactions between dominant or elite and subordinate or subaltern groups. Spivak's famous negative answer to the question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” implies that silence is a critical component of subaltern identity. She is of the view that subaltern is a person or a group of people that have been excluded from society. They do not have a voice, and are lost in the world due to assimilation and colonialism. Implicit in the term are related questions of power, agency and representation. In different historical contexts, the subaltern has been understood as synonymous with women, children, colonial subjects, the poor, the illiterate, the proletariat, or the religious or ethnic minority. Today's subalternity scholars, however, do not intend for the term to be reduced to any single oppressed group or minority.

Many women writers have taken the subject of subaltern unintentionally while dealing with the women issues. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be viewed as an attempt to reckon with some of the main questions driving the field of Subaltern Studies. In the 1980's and 1990's many other women novelists emerged and portrayed with great insight and understanding, the dilemma faced by subaltern women in a traditional society

where dual morality is the accepted norm. This portrayal by women novelist went through many changes according to changing socio-cultural conditions such as feminist and humanist movements. They advocated subaltern women's issues and looked at the world from women's perspective. They have also focused on the problem of subaltern women and their genuine aspirations for economic independence, equality, and freedom. Stubborn and original women suffering caused by broken relationships also presented. Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, and others unreservedly expressed their views on the issues of woman and society in their novels and their women are either against subalternity or have a quest for moving against subalternity.

But the concept of sexual subalternity is missing in the works of these writers. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to ascertain an identity that is not forced by a patriarchal society. Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956), Ruth Prewar Jhabvala's first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955) and her later *Heat and Dust* (1975) which was awarded the Booker Prize, and Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) are good examples. Sex is implied in these novels, but depicted more overtly as mentioned by most of the critics in novels of Shobha De, wherein she describes the exotic sex lives of the high society in Mumbai. Most of these critics forget that sexuality especially women's sexuality is an important aspect amongst women's fight against subalternity. Shobha De, like D. H. Lawrence, has openly portrayed the picture of sex in most of her novels.

Shobha De treats sex as a healthy act; obviously she expects the same from her male counterpart. She puts forward woman is as equally essential, as wonderfully powerful as her male counterpart on bed. Modesty is the same for both, men and women. "A brazen stare by a man at a woman is a breach of refinement. Where sex is concerned modesty is not only good form, for the good of the weaker sex but also to guard the spiritual good of the stronger sex" (Jung, 33). De's woman portrays the tortured consciousness of the urban high class woman, who, in quest of her identity undergoes a metamorphosis—from a silent sufferer to a hard-core rebel, breaking with the age-old and restraining ethics of the male-dominated world and moves out against subalternity. For this reason De has been acclaimed and has achieved world-wide reputation. In *Snapshots* Swati claims, "We rejoice in our sexuality... we do not suppress it, we don't dismiss it.... Sex does not threaten us" (*Snapshots*, 97). In the similar fashion Rashmi asserts in *Snapshots*: "I love sex like I love food. It's the same sort of hunger—and I knew it when I was eight or ten and used to get my neighbour's kid to touch me. But it scared me then. It doesn't scare me now" (185).

In *Snapshots* Aparna's metamorphosis is very transparent. Since her childhood Aparna has been told to treat her sexuality as something shameful and therefore suppress her quest and desires related to sexual activity. But she is not fragmented by the psychology of "guilt" and "inferiorization" (Gilbert, 50) instilled in her by society. She revolts and uses her "sexual potential" (*Snapshots*, 7) to enjoy life. Very often, she participates in erotic sexual behaviour and initiates the entire exercise along with Prem. She has learnt to look beyond the "shame" (6) that is so much a part of middle-class Indian upbringing and to accept pleasure without guilt. Thus she moves from the subaltern to against subalternity dynamics of woman.

The famous American author Helen Gurley Brown in her bestselling 1962 book *Sex and the Single Girl* challenged the primacy of marriage and perceptions of singleness itself. While traditional advice manuals urged young women to preserve their virtue, Brown insisted that premarital sexual experience could both serve a single woman's short-term needs and make her more appealing to her future husband. At a time when the average American

woman married at 20, and women routinely sacrificed educational and career ambitions for familial ones, Brown proposed a life of work, leisure, and sexual pleasure for the unmarried woman nearing 30. In the same way Shobha De's women with their new found release from matrimonial bondage adopts different perspective, and revolt against the old order. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*; Nisha in *Sultry Days*; Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*; Aparna in *Snapshots* decided to remain single. They are involved with men physically but are not ready to abandon their freedom by getting married: "You've dumped the guy. You're feeling right on the top of everything. Powerful, strong. Free. Mainly free. That's the happy part of the story" (*Surviving Men*, 54). Most of women in De's fiction have pre-marital sex. Sex is no longer a taboo to them.

From the analysis of De's fiction a new women emerges. Women belonging to this new clan do not take marriage as holy union: it happens because it is convenient to them. Her women launch a rebellion against the conservative tradition of moral values. Even marriage does not curtail sexual freedom in her women. Educated and attractive, confident and assertive, this new class of women has given marriage a new meaning because of the absence of mutual faithfulness between husband and wife. Male-female relations in a marriage where women's emotions and feelings are considered subaltern are as exploitative as the relation of a prostitute to a customer. Such marriages thus become a kind of prostitution where the wife who has sex with her husband feels almost alienated from her own self. To this Marxists call a women's sex-specific oppression. The female here suffer as an oppressed wife. Karuna, Anjali, Maya, Reema, Aparna, Surekha are wife- prostitute who does not act but is acted upon, an object of passivity, of self-surrender in sex without any participation in it. There unwilling body symbolizes protest and rage. This is what Patricia Waugh utters in *Feminine Fictions* "Traditionally, women have always used their bodies as instruments of their protest against their feminine positioning and identification" (Waugh, 174).

Shobha De has highlighted that sex is the bed-rock of all relationships but many a time 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. She has explained ironically that if man does not give woman her due recognition she will take stroke of the situation and strike again and again in different ways to assert her identity.

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