

Shobha De's Ironic Representation of a Conflict of Man-Woman Relationship

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Abstract: *Literature is indeed the most explicit record of the human spirit which shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationship and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. But changes in socio-economic conditions have changed our patriarchal attitude to gender and this contemporary change is reflected in literature too. De's objective is to place sex in the priority.*

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1. Introduction

Literature is indeed the most explicit record of the human spirit. It reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationship and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. Milton Albrecht aptly says,

Literature reflects accepted patterns of thought, feeling and action including patterns of expressions and society's unconscious assumptions. It innovates, giving expression to emerging themes that may not yet be definable in literal terms.1

Fiction, being the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian Literature. Indian Novelist has dealt with family relationships with high seriousness because the traditional heritage of India gives great importance to the family unit. They have extensively dealt with the theme of man- woman relationship which has a great historical, sociological and cultural significance. The family in India, during the last few decades has been under a process of social change, thus substantially affecting man-woman relationship. The role of husband and wife is the principal component in a family context that has undergone a vital change due to growing enlightens and the movement for emancipation of women. In this regard, literature has played a sterling role in raising the readers' consciousness. In various forms, it has provided a glimpse into female psyche and dealt with the full range of female experiences. It portrays, without inhibitions, the new woman who refuses to play a second fiddle to her husband in various walks of life.

Changes in socio-economic conditions have changed our patriarchal attitude to gender and this contemporary change is reflected in literature too. Indian writers in their works present images of women which are totally different from the images of the past, according to which woman was viewed as an evil counterfeit, 'a weak vassal'. Mohan Rakesh, an eminent Hindi writer, holds revolutionary ideas about marriage and man-wife relationship. His main stress is on the development of personality and genius. Man and woman in Rakesh's view are two questioning individuals facing each other.

Economic dependence is incidental and not so much important in man-woman relationship, what matters more is an impact of surroundings and environment. He believed that man and woman may live in a mutual companionship, on emotional understanding. In his book 'Ek Aur Zindagi', Mohan Rakesh depicts the changing relations of husband and wife in society.

Nayantara Sahgal's treatment of man- woman relationship is based on her entrenched faith in 'new humanism' according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere sex object but as man's equal and honored partner. Her concept of a free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional attitude. Sahgal's women seek to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their free selves, where there is no need for hypocrisy and where character is judged by the purity of heart and not chastity of body. Husband-wife alienation and consequent break seem to be inevitable when women and men fail to build up a relationship based on mutual communication, companionship and equality. Her novel vividly portrays the young hearts broken by compulsions of matrimony and the call of a new-found love. In her novel "The Storm in Chandigarh"(1969) Vishal's marriage had been a failure, as a widower he is denied satisfaction in a liaison with Gouri, a Bengali businessman's wife who finds security in arranged marriage but she needs and establishes relationship with Vishal which is based on sex. Vishal develops a deeper attachment to Saroj, wife of Inder who has an affair with Moro, wife of Jit. The fictional situation of young hearts broken up by compulsion of marriage and call of new love suggests that marriage is not just sexual relationship; it means companionship on equal terms. Man- Woman relationship in Bharti Mukherjee's novel is the outcome of the cultural alienation that is a world phenomenon now. The tremendous difference between two cultures, two ways of life leads a person to a feeling of shock. Her novel 'Wife' stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into the heroine's psyche.

The age- old institutions of family and marriage have been under a tremendous strain in the modern times. Commenting upon the breaking up the family, David McReynolds observes, "Nor can a person find his identity in the family -for that institution is breaking up."²

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One of the major factors for the disintegration of family is the rampant promiscuity in sexual relation. Yet another cause is that by winning the right to enter the labour market women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes marriage less necessary, resulting in estrangement between man and his wife. 'Frailty, *The Name is Woman*' by R. W. Desai is an excellent portrayal of the man-woman relationship. Indian woman, as depicted in this novel, is truly representative of the transitory phase of Indian society, torn as under by the traditional values, the country's rich heritage and the modern liberal values imbibed mainly from the West. Jaya in 'That long silence' dares to break the conventional image of woman in following words.

Sita following her husband into exile. Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband..... Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travail, arguing that "What I have to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself.(68)

In human context and in human culture sexuality is almost something more than just pleasure and reproduction. It is often in the form of power and dominance and is experienced and expressed in all human being. Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' described how the social structure and social constructs define our ideas about sexuality. According to him open discourse on sexuality is of almost importance to personal liberation. Daphne Patai says:

Female heterosexuality is not a biological drive or an individual woman's erotic attraction or attachment to another human animal which happens to be male. Female heterosexuality is a set of social institutions and practices defined and regulated by patriarchal kinship system by both civil and religious law and by strenuously enforced mores and deeply entrenched values and taboos are about male fraternity and the oppression and exploitation of women. They are not about love, human warmth, solace, fun, pleasure or deep knowledge between people.3

In short sexuality is something to be celebrated for its subtleties and not something to be feared or ridiculed. Despite plentiful heritage of erotic art and literature, an average Indian is still secretive and reticent in sexual matters. The society is still dominated by double morality and prudery. An open minded discussion on sex is rarity. The managing director of *India Today*, Dilip Bobb writes in his article 'The Neo conservatives':

Ironically in the land that gave the world the Kama Sutra, the most elevated form of sexual literature, the Indian Male has regressed into something of a prude..... Indian male is confused, insecure and unsure of his sexual identity. A majority of men surveyed might agree that women want sex as much as men do, they also believe in equal pleasure for men and women in bed, but when it comes to the defining issues concerning sex and sexual liberation, it's clear that the Indian male is as

conservative and prudish as his grandparents were.4

Shiv Visvanathan, an Indian cultural Anthropologist admits that

Indian men are wooden like still- life pieces, wanting change but still caught in old frameworks..... It is the women who are changing. They are more tolerant more ready to talks, sort relationships. ...Solves the realists but always modern India; the consumer revolution, the information revolution the sexual revolution and the under revolution. The woman's body is the creative body.5

Shobha De's observations are the same like all these scholars. She affirms that:

There is a great deal of ignorance about sex, even in this day and age. Even in Urban India. Even with all the sex talk on T.V. and in our movies. Even with the new openness, it's amazing how little people actually know about their own bodies and the potential inherent in exploring physical avenues as a couple.6

De's objective is to place sex in the priority. Her canvas is confined to the city based upper class urban society. She prefers these strata of society as she is intimate with its frivolities and facilities, hypocrisy and low ethicality. The class enjoys the best comforts and conveniences in life but still it is pitifully raw and unsophisticated in so far as sexual relations and perceptions are concerned. She often said that sex is the bedrock of all relationship. It needs to be freely and frankly dealt with.

The women in De's novels are active, dominating and assertive in the act of sex too. Her women discuss and practice sex with unusual candor. All sexual taboos are broken by them. She lets her men and women experiment variously and vigorously, for it is essential for the discovery of sexual self and identity. So De reversed the role of man and woman in her novels. Her women play the leading part in sexual dalliances where as men just try to be in sync with them. In all her novels there is breakup in marriages because of extra marital affairs. Her women are daring and dashing and do not hesitate to establish an extra marital relationship. The upper class modern life easily prods them opportunities to meet different people.

My study reflects De in her ironic presentation of certain ideas through a conflict of man-woman relationship. All her protagonists like Malika, Karuna, Aasha Rani, Alisha, Anjali, Rita, Sudha Rani, Amrita, Swati, Surekha, Aparna, Reema practices free and uninhibited sex. In their search for viable human relationship on equal terms and their assertion of control over their body and mind, these women tend to inhibit the difference that mark the existence of their separate feminine identity. But in the end in their false and ill found concept of women's freedom these women deviate from their real motive that gets obscured due to the contemporary charm offered by their deviant behavior. Men in De's fiction consider women simply insignificant. Fed up with self-absorbing

indifferent and male supremacist attitude of their husbands, women in frustration turn towards extra-marital relationship. Their frustrating experience turns them antagonistic towards men. Shobha De wants to show that such type of relationships and sexual escapades in no way can be considered a solution to the problems of oppressed and subjugated women.

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