

Research Paper—English



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## Love-Hate Relationship In Shobha De's Sisters



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*Sisters* is considered as an explosive novel of Shobha De. It is known for its “Pacy narrative quality” and for its “ostensibly intimate view of glitzy side”<sup>1</sup> [*Indian Review of Books*, p. 26.] of Bombay life. The novel deals with the psychic conflict in its liberated woman protagonist who is caught between a personal self and a societal self. The novel deals with the theme of women’s struggle for identity in the male-dominated society. Apart from this, the novel records the suffering of a woman in the patriarchal set up. In this set up, she is treated as an object.

These Industries are on the verge of bankruptcy. The reasons for the virtual collapse of Hiralal Industries are still unknown to Mikki. According to a press version, it was the involvement of Mikki’s father in multi-crore scandal and his financial debt to the tune of eighty crores. This resulted in the death of her father. She wanted to take hold of the industries of her father, which required a lot of attention. According to Shobha De, all people need sex. It is something special, something beautiful, something shared. The woman would get sex on her terms now. There is nothing derogatory or clandestine in sex. In fact, sex is “the bedrock of all relationships,” [*The Illustrated Weekly of India*. 1992.] To a question by a woman ‘sex... who need Shobha De answers’, “Everybody, darling everybody.” [Singh, K., And De, Shobha. (ed.) 1993. p. 208.] She voices her concerns through characters in all

her novels. Her women are not unaware of their sex potential.

Only some piggish, tradition ridden persons speak ill of it. Shobha De takes up the issue of feminism. She also discusses the issue of woman’s liberation in a very challenging and untraditional manner. She does not hesitate to deal with sex. The sex is called a “taboo subject”. She confesses, “It is important for women to talk about it. Our mother endured it silently because it was a taboo subject. Nobody was interested in woman’s view on sex. Whether it was erotic poetry or prose, the perspective was always that of a man. It is only now that women are expressing the way they feel about this most elementary ... aspect of conjugal life. It is a kind of catharsis.” [*Survival Tactics*] Shobha De’s novels fascinate “both men and women from sixteen to ninety.” [*Survival Tactics*.] Ramchandran has rightly stated, “You may love her or hate her, but it is difficult to ignore.” [*Survival Tactics*.] In the novels of Shobha De, men are depicted as hesitant, coward and fearful. Her women are not going to be emotional, subdued and weak ladies of manners. On the contrary, they are to be assertive, pragmatic and strong. Shobha De’s women, “symbolise the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality, that characterized modern age.” [Swain, S.P. p.133.] In the novel *Sisters*, we encounter a woman who struggles against constraints of being woman. Finally she succeeds

in asserting her identity.

It mentioned a deal that had scoured and money that he was unable to payback. Loans to the tune of eighty crores. Licenses that had been acquired under suspicious circumstances. A rival whose project had been stalled using ressure tactics in Delhi. Was her father such a manipulator? Or had he become victim of his own ambitions in the end?" [Sisters, 1992 : 104-105.] Mikki is a very matured and decisive woman character of Shobha De. She is unlike Anjali who is sex-crazy. Mikki is very different woman after her father's death. She behaves more and more responsibly. She could be misled or misguided. It is Mikki who holds the key to decisions.

Shobha De thinks that women have to assert their independence in order to claim their identity in the society. K. K. Sinha rightly remarks, "Shobha De stands for equal and normal treatment to the woman in this hurly-burly world of ours. She is one of the leading writers portraying the man – woman relationship especially in urban metropolitan India. She stand for the New Woman – casual looking but ambitious, professional focused and in control. She has an agenda, and she will work towards it single mindedly and even alone if need be." [Sinha, K.K. 2000. p. 98.] Mikki has confidence, ambition, lust, greed and hate which her an untraditional woman. On this ground, the novel has been called Indian in names and setting, and American in inspiration. Sarbani Sen comments, "Shobha De is producing a *desi* version of an American best-seller where the Indian ambience is merely an exoticising on an unmistakably American cake." [Sen, Sarbani, 2000. p. 63.]

So she does not displease Shanay, her cousin. Shanay's mother Anjanaben strongly desires that Shanay is married to Mikki. But Shanay is afraid and fearful of Mikki. Shanay is inducted into Hiralal Industries by Mikki. His induction is hated by most of the workers and particularly by Ramanbhai. Mikki is very tactful as she reappoints Shanay in the industry not to help him but to help herself. She asks him to keep a close watch over the

activities of people. Shanay works very sincerely for Mikki not for getting her hand in marriage because he knew, "His love for his beautiful cousin was doomed." [42] Shanay worked to please Mikki who reposes full faith in the working of Shanay. Shanay brings her the report of the alleged murder of her father. This report is not relied upon by Mikki. Mikki's unique character is manifested in the fact that she does not trust in the surface reality. She wants to go deeper into the matter. Only after thorough verification and analysis, she understands the truth of the matter. She advises Shanay to go deeper into the reports of her father's death. She is in reality unprepared for any responsibility. Shobha De recommended a mature attitude to sex.

Sex for her women is palpable, pulsating and compelling reality. They do not hesitate to accept it as an important part of life. They do not remain subdued to let man take all the initiative. On the other hand, they think and talk about it openly. They participate in it actively, turning upside-down the traditional image of woman. For this woman, sex is shameful, hidden sin of her existence. Shobha

Mikki hardly appears to nurture any sentimentalism at the death of both her parents. In the beginning itself, she seems to prefer her wish and taste to the social convention. Her hatred for any show of sentimentalism is apparent to us. In the beginning itself, Shobha De makes her intentions. Both Alisha and Mikki refuse to sulk and appear subdued in order to look sober and domesticated. The death of their father, in Mikki's case both the parents, does not seem to matter much to them as they want to get down to their business sooner than the society expects them to do. Mikki seems desperate to get back to America to resume her interrupted semester. The focus of the action does not deviate much from these two girls. The novelist first concentrates on Mikki. Mikki seems to be a poised, level-headed, strong and mature girl. She takes over the intricacies of the business from her dead father. She begins to plough her way through the business world

difficulties. Mikki does not like to be patronised. She is bold and confident. Anjanaben calls her, “a difficult girl.”[37] She hardly regrets her sex and firmly believes in herself, her capability to select the desired and discard undesirable. In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is usually the male who decides, guides and directs the female.

In selection of a life-partner i.e. the husband, Mikki is very prudent and tactful. She finds Navin as not a suitable, “Husband material.” Prolonging the decision is another way of rejection or denial. Navin is discarded due to this prolonging. Mikki is attracted to Binny. She makes up her mind to marry this man like Asha Rani of *Starry Nights*. Mikki has a weakness of becoming emotional like Asha Rani. Mikki develops a soft corner for Binny, though Binny humiliates her and beats her. Yet Mikki does not forget him. Binny appears to be very straightforward initially. He tells Mikki “You are a woman after my own heart. No wasting time, no wasting words. To the point.” [56] These words appeal to Mikki who consents to marry him even after Binny has put two strong conditions for marriage. Binny addresses her as “princess.”[56] This word was enough to flatter Mikki and win her heart. Mikki decides to marry him. She goes in for a middle-aged Binny. What attract her to him is his uncanny aggressive manner. He helps Mikki to learn about the other side of her personality.

The total submission is a characteristic of a traditional woman. This adds to the superiority of man and consequent exploitation of woman. Her honeymoon with Binny is to end in a fiasco. Binny is a womanizer and he has already got a family. His marriage with Mikki is only to keep up his image in the society. Strongly enough, Mikki remains silent, for she does not care for his past life. But she cannot tolerate Binny’s indifference to her. Except for a few moments when “he poured falcon of joy on her limbs.”[109] Her life with him becomes a veritable hell. The process of dehumanization of Mikki begins, when all her property is transferred to Binny. Besides, she is

denied motherhood for she has to keep always fit for him. Being a representative of the oppressive system, Binny does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner both in life and business. He is characteristically outspoken when he tells her that he needs a wife. She is conscious of her precarious condition. She pleads with him.

This kind of objectification of woman and her subjugation to men angers Shobha De. She detests the institution of marriage. Before marriage, all the males behave like slaves to their prospective wives. Binny addresses Mikki as “my princess.” But after marriage, he orders her “Be my slave.” Binny justifies this position of woman on the ground that the real position of woman is in the home and not outside. Before marriage, Binny behaves like a very old slave of Mikki. He embraces her in office. He hugged her passionately as if a small boy hugs his newly purchased toys. Her marriage is a failure. She says to Amy, “I wanted someone with whom I could share my life. Is that such an impossible expectation.”[119] Shobha De exposes urban educated woman who takes man as play-things. Alisha has sexual meeting with Navin. She knows him to be engaged with Mikki once. Her action is an act of revenge towards her sister rather than any love. Her relationship for Dr. Kurien who attends on her in the hospital is purely physical as the doctor has his wife and children. The doctor’s observations to Alisha speak of Shobha De’s critical concept of urban woman, “For woman like you, men are play-things, today you want to break up my marriage. Tomorrow you will get bored and move on to some other man. Where will that leave me.”[116]

All women characters of Shobha De Mikki, Alisha, Leelaben, Urmila and Sapana belong to the urban world. But they are unable to fight against being play-things or sex images. Shobha De fails to articulate woman’s anger against men. Women’s anger gives a disappointing message in the novel written after forty-five years of independence. When Amy provokes Mikki to assert her self-respect, the latter is unwilling to

cross the boundary of a typical traditional Indian Woman. She exposes her pathetic helplessness when she says, “He (her husband) is like a god to me. I do not care who he sleeps with.

Leelaben is sinking in the hospital. On the contrary, her daughter Alisha has suddenly become rich, is drinking and dancing with Navin in a night club. She has enough money to spend on her mother’s treatment, but she has no time to share her pain. Dr. Kurien’s well-meaning advice to Alisha is a testimony to what parents expect from their children. Alisha appears as an angry young woman. Her reaction to the news of Seth Hiralal’s death survived by his only daughter, Mikki, shakes her terribly. Her own identity as another daughter of Seth Hiralal seems to be lost in this news. Alisha voices the author’s own desire of liberation for women in sexual matters. Alisha is shown as having sex with different men. She shrugs aside the sexual conventionality. She runs after the desire of body without any social or moral inhibitions. There are extensive scenes of her sexual encounter with Navin. She seems to think whether Mikki did the same things with Navin as she copulates with him. Shobha De seems to direct us to this part of her silent, subtle revenge. She seems to support our feelings for her. Alisha does this, “to obliterate any memory Navin might have retained of his love making with the women she hated.” [497] These free sexual encounters participate and enjoy the sexual acrobatics with Navin. She is extremely possessive of him. She is pained to see him to pick up his wrist-watch a sigh of his departure after their love making. It seems that she can never be satisfied of having had enough sex. In an arousing scene that follows, Dr. Kurien expresses a similar idea as he blurts

while having sex with her, “All the rich women are the same – you want more all the time nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all... it’s free.” [541] Dr. Kurien’s brutal sexual attack on Alisha sums up his frustration with her as she seems to have an insatiable sexual instinct. This frank outlook for sex in Alisha continues till the end of the novel. She continues to pursue males for their physical gratification. The last scene of the novel ends on a meaningful humorous warning by her to the bachelors who pay no attention to her and Mikki. Both Alisha and Mikki establish themselves as assertive, domineering, focused and sexually frank ladies during the course of the novel *Sisters*. She quickly begins to enter her father’s business shoes almost successfully. Simultaneously she begins to accept the demands of her flesh. She recognizes a feminine sensibility in herself. She successfully flirts with Shanay who in cherishing her only “was dreaming of hopeless dream” but still fails to get “her out of his system.” [438]

Mikki initiates the move to reconcile with her sister, Alisha. After a lot of efforts, Alisha is won over. Mikki is a realist. She is not the kind of woman who contents to live a selfish and egotistic life. This nature of Mikki inspires her to go to attend the funeral of Binny Malhotra. The novel ends with an epilogue. This ending marks the poetic ending of sisters, leaving certain chords ringing in the readers’ hearts and guessing. Both the sisters decide to depart to London. Their departure is a kind of salvation from the evils of corrupt business world. It is for a complete cure and change and acceptance of life. Both the sisters want to have life partner or a sex partner and perhaps, it may be the later.

## REFERENCE

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