

## ***The Treatment of Women: a Study from Shobhaa De's Sisters***

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In the masculine society, a woman recognises herself unassertive and an object in the society. "This has always been a man's world... History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of independence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other." (The Second Sex.93-171).

The problems of disparity and prejudice in this patriarchal society, where in the beginning of her life, a girl as a subsidiary, is the property of her father who decides the next man (husband) to control her under his supervision. Hence, she cannot dare to affirm herself as a sovereign being and she cannot speak of her feelings; no man even understands her genuine rights also. Literally speaking, in the man's society, a woman has to adjust or otherwise to struggle.

The most conspicuous aspect of Shobhaa De's writing is her fervent approach towards woman's problems in the society. De's writing is her fervent approach towards woman's problems in the society. She mainly deals with the issues concerning the modern society. She also focuses on the different facts of the urban Indian society. She attempts to project the large society as a whole through her characters.

The women characters of her novels are shown madly in love with the male character. Love, jealousy and manipulations are the prominent themes of her books. Women folk always try their best to lean on others. They want a supporting post to hold on to push their life. In that, how many of them succeeded in the race we have to analyse. Besides, she wanted to explore the real life of sisters but could not say that she achieved the real goal or not.

In her works, she advocated defiant sort of woman who is ready to upheaval against the established communal taboos which tie her to behave as submissive one and always be subjected to man's say – so. The women characters are individual who faces single – handed at vicious assaults of existence. Her woman is trying to seek self-fulfilment through self-actualisation. Her intention is to reconstruct this established social theory about woman. She wishes that man has to come to know woman's power as a destructive one.

Shobhaa De's novel *Sisters* (1992) has essential women characters Mallika @ Mikki and Alisha. In this novel, De focused liberated women who are working with confidence and affirmed for their position in the society. In *Sisters*, De has presented liberated working women of defident, wealthy, brimming with confidence and affirmed for their position in society. *Sisters* is a story of two beautiful young ladies, Mikki and Alisha, who like to live a life of their own which does not restrict them to tiptoe all small social rules.

The story starts with news of Seth Hiralal and his wife has dead in the air crash. After this poignant demise of Mikki's parents, she is over burdened with the responsibilities of her father's

entire business which regrettably runs in loss. Being a girl, Mikki has no right to enjoy in public places but as a practical lady. But she challenges the usual conventional ideas of the society which considers women tainted and not eligible to do any work creatively.

Mikki determines to borrow finance from her fiancé, Navin. But, when she comes to know Navin's incapacity to respond to her situation, she breaks off her engagement with him. These words show her self-assured and strong view towards life:

“Cheer you. It s not the end of the world, you know.

We'll find someone else to help us out...” (SS 82)

Like traditional women, De's woman is no longer limited to the respective function and to the dominated by male guardianship. De's women characters do marry they will like to live their lives in the fullest sense. If their marriage is not working according to their own criteria, they will not pretend to survive mutely. She lives with a man not because she has to, but because she wants to. It certainly represents a big step forward.

In the treatment of characters, De is primarily interested in the projection of the psyche of female protagonists living separately. She treats her women characters as individuals destined to face single-handed at ferocious assaults of existence.

Mikki's teenaged life is filled with heart aches and heart breaks. Mikki, when approached from an angle, is understood to be looking forward to affection responses as well as the right to carve for her an identity, self- assertion and success. Mikki is found to be craving for love and affection. In the absence of the warmth of love, she has been feeling lonely, till she leaves America for higher education. Back in India, her half-sister Alisha, her lover Navin and later her husband Binny Malhotra, create an atmosphere not conducive that denies love to Mikki. They cause anxiety either by interference or indifference, which hurts Mikki deeply. Besides these people, there are other men who are selfish, disloyal and narrow minded like Ramanabhai seems to spoil her career. It is during her stay in Bostan that Mikki fairely enjoyed freedom and love of friends.

The horrid reality of her situation strikes her hard, as she is the only child and sole survivor of her parents and their business. She has to give up her co placement and secure life of Boston and settle in India. She suddenly realises that she has nobody around to comfort, support, protect and redirect her in the unusually stressful situation.

Commenting on Mikki's intention to leave for America unmindful of its consequences, and her unsentimental reaction to the death of her parents, as their mangled bodies lie shrouded just in front of her. In Shobhaa De's portrayal of Mikki, as inferred from her reactions to Alisha, Navin, Binny, Ramanabhai, Shanay and every other character in the novel, is a loveable lady, with enormous capacity for spontaneous and unconditional love for others and of remarkable honesty about her feelings.

None of her actions can be contributed to the mere passion for money or luxury. Hence, her nonchalant response to her parent's death has different reasons. Her education and cultural refinement has taught her to be controlled and focused in tackling emotional situation, to the truth

that Mikki's parents have failed to establish with her bonds of love, strong and intimate enough to move her deep grief and tears. Not that Mikki is emotionally dehydrated but her need for parental affection and care has remained unattended. So, her response to the loss of her parents in the way she feels about it and is honest enough not to overdo it.

Several incidents in the novel substantiate that Mikki's primary need has been love and affection and that her circumstances to grant her what she desired. Normally recollections of an only daughter about her parents will be filled with nostalgia with deep sorrow. But, Mikki has no fond memories of her parents. About her father,

"She remembered how he'd inspect her mother thoroughly before stepping out for a party, often asking her to change her saree, or replace an old hand bag with new one. She also had distinct memories of him subjecting her to a similar scrutiny often reprimanding her for dirty fingernails or for wearing ill-matches socks with her English shoes." (SS.15).

Mikki only remembers his fastidious taste. She acknowledges him as an aesthete who responded to beauty, music, flowers and sunset but he has not left behind unforgettable memories of love. Hiralal, Mikki's father is not blamed to have been cruel, but he thought that the material provisions and the social status that he had given his daughter were enough. Mikki tells Amy, "I wanted to admire my father and never could...." (SS.124). In Mikki's opinion Maltiben, her mother, is an equally snobbish and status-conscious aristocrat than a tender loving mother. She does not have memories of intimate moments shared with her mother, to cherish after her demise.

Maltiben's scrupulousness about maintaining her princely lifestyle and family, honour is vivid in Mikki's memory. Once, Mikki had a fancy to wear silver toe-rings, her mother objected it, telling that silver toe-rings were fit only for servants. The few summer holidays enjoyed in Europe, America, Japan and Africa are still fresh in her memory, but those trips were with her father's business partners. She admits that she had hardly seen her father in a casual and relaxed mood at home. She feels sad that her "hours of glory" at school, have gone unrecognised and unappreciated by her parents. She has not forgiven her parents for placing their socializing and money-making and indulging their only daughter's emotional needs. Ramanabhai's words on one such occasion when she was broken-hearted at her parent's failure to appear at a school function, "I thought you needed a parents..." (SS.11) keeps ringing in her ears reminding her always.

Mikki gets ready to be an ideal wife of Binny Malhotra who treats her for her benefits only. Binny denies Mikki's love. She loves him intensely and realises that her husband is hers; making the readers feel that marriage makes husband and wife really sink into her combined selves. But Binny does not show such feelings. His attitude to her is that of a dominant male and he treats her as his slave. Binny's blunt reply is a commentary of women's position which the novelist expresses:

"In our family women are trained to obey their husband .... You will never I repeat, never question me or complain where I go, what I do, when and with whom is my business.... Your job is to look beautiful." (SS 116)

The story unfurls into another stage of womanhood. As a married woman, Mikki wishes to beget a child and she finds that she is pregnant. But Binny doesn't want her to have child. He insists her to abort the child. She deplores,

"I was so stunned... I started crying, did he want our child? And he bellowed No! No! No! He told me to arrange for an abortion. When I refused he said it was to frighten me when I heard that horrible word! Where would I go?" (SS 119)

Mikki is too helpless to affirm her position and fight the male antagonism. When she hears a phone call that Binny has died in an accident, she is told by her friends not to attend the funeral. But, Mikki as a true Indian wife laments: "Absent myself? What non sense? He was my husband" (SS 169)

Forced to live in India, Mikki feels out of place. Rather, her situation in loneliness, Mikki's candid approach to life finds her relatives Anjanben, Ganga, Dhondu and other servants ridiculous. They are altogether at a different wavelength from her, too far to relate with them.

Mikki had never felt close with her aunts and uncles. The hypocritical value system of the community has no promises of true affection or friendship. Social ceremonies and ethics, even funeral gatherings, in rich societies are converted into extended gossip sessions and Mikki unable to find herself at ease in such a social set up.

Social rules have always been harsh for woman. De's woman is not hesitant to live a licentious life. From the confident employee of her father, Ramankaka, Mikki comes to know about her sister Alisha who is the daughter of her father's unrevealed family. Alisha has crossed the pool of sexual conventionality without any social or moral intuitions. Mikki tries her best to have a productive rapport with Alisha. Therefore, she frantically holds on to meet and convince Alisha. But Alisha is no good than a stranger to Mikki. Alisha insults Mikki literally and suffered unkindly. This reveals in Alisha's statement: "Do we? I don't need you baby. If you need me, it will be on my terms" (SS 26).

The love and co- operation of Alisha, Mikki believes will strengthen her soul and put an end to her sense and feeling of isolation. Mikki's unrelenting to establish a relationship with Alisha and bring her around to accept her love becomes her chosen mission, Mikki means to find in a sister, the affection that she missed in her parents. Literally, Mikki begs for love from her sister Alisha to pull her away from the solitude.

But Alisha, who is a timid and lovable young woman, leads a flirtatious life. Alisha appears as an angry young woman. The contrast between two sisters gives a dramatic touch to the narrative. For Alisha, money gives identity and is more important than any human relations. To Mikki, blood relations are more valuable than wealth. She is apologetic and reconciliatory in her approach to the step aoster. Alisha is rough, abusive and at war with Mikki who begs for her help as she feels lonely and helpless and wants to help her financially. The contrast between two sisters is the most important aspect of the growth of the plot in the novel.

Alisha distrusts Mikki and the hatred is based on Alisha's sense of being neglected by her father. She is a victim of her own illusions. In fact, she needs her sister more than Mikki does. Mikki's efforts to improve the strained relations between them become worse when she enemies

poison on Alisha's ears. Alisha imitates her sister and finds a sense of satisfaction when Mikki is in trouble. She moves closely with the men whom Mikki is in trouble. She traps Navin and indulges in fornication, not to satisfy her carnal yearning but to show Mikki that she is not inferior to anyone. She misses no occasion to insult her sister Mikki.

Once again Mikki is denied love and affection. She is distraught with Alisha's reprisal, resentment, hatred, and rivalry. In the first telephonic conversation that Mikki has the goodness to start, she pleads that she is alone and they could be friends. In the ensuing change-meeting Mikki begs, tearfully that she looks forward only to Alisha's friendship, nothing else. She swears that she considers Alisha as a part of her life.

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Alisha has sexual meetings with Navin knowing him to be engaged with Mikki once. Her actions are an act of reprisal towards her sister. Her relationship with Dr. Kurien who attends on her is purely physical as a doctor who has his family on his own. At one stage, Alisha is hospitalized and needs blood. Mikki gives her blood and triumphs over the hatred of Alisha. Ironically Mikki and Alisha are united.

Mikki's stumble upon different men helps her grow into an independent minded woman, while Alisha, failing to get any hint from her experience, becomes an introvert. As a progressive and pragmatic ladies, Mikki and Alisha does not want to impound themselves within the four walls of a house, but being a representative of this scrupulous social system.

Within the framework of a novel, Shobhaa De depicts the breaking the institution of marriage. In such a situation, man and woman do not become one in marriage; they merely become partners in love. Shobhaa De tries to redeem her protagonists, Mikki by making her deeply human. Her concern for her half-sister's determination to make amends for her father's vices and misdeeds by rehabilitating Alisha in her own house, speaks volumes of her kind nature. Even her love Bunny who discarded her shows her magnanimity for her character. Her hopeless passion for love making and desire for getting on in the world finally yield place to her concern for the well-being of her half-sister Alisha and she seem to be "more sinned against than sinning."

Mikki suffers and it is through her sufferings she learns the art of living. Her final accomplishment comes when she wins the love and affection of her half-sister Alisha, who pinned for legitimacy in life, but failed, because her father had no guts to own her in public. Shobhaa De brings these two women together, who blunder their way for while and turned mutual distrust to love and affection passing the bounds of social restrictions. The novel is appropriately titled as *Sisters*.

Shobhaa De's women "symbolised the overpowering materialism and the lack of spirituality and characterized modern age." In *Sisters* too, the moment one looks at Mikki and Alisha, knows that these girls won't lead an existence the circumference of which the others,

especially males decide. Both Alisha and Mikki refuse to sulk and appear subdued in order to look sober and domesticated. Mikki is the woman who responds antagonistically to a phallogocentric patriarchal society and Alisha is the girl who is overtly hostile and violent.

Shobhaa De's novels shows that novelist's discerning portrayal of the secret depths of the human psyche; her accurate characterisation, and her captivating style which invokes vivid images compels the reader to identify him or herself with the characters and situation. Shobhaa De has tried her best to expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society in which hapless and forsaken woman longs for love and pleasure and wants to fly freely in the sky of freedom.

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