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Defining And Redefining Women In Shobhaa De's *Sisters*: Dichotomy Of Genders

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Abstract:

Over the years, Shobhaa De has established herself as a prominent writer on the Indian literary landscape; her name has become associated with enviable appeal and well-defined charm. Her topics and language are more current than those of other female authors. In her books, sex is no longer taboo, which has attracted a large number of readers. She made a reputation for herself as a freelance writer and columnist for many prominent publications and newspapers. Her third novel *Sisters* was published in 1992. It paints a picture of two corporate half-sisters, Mallika and Alisha, who strive to make a name for themselves in the business world when their father, Hiralal, passes away. They are searching for a sense of themselves. Mallika marries Binny, a businessman, to elevate her social standing. Alisha, her half-sister, finds solace in the companionship of Amar and Dr.Kurien. They create competition to gain social unity. Mikki and Alisha are reunited in the book following the death of the latter's mother. Mikki tries to heal her sister's injured self with her motherly love. Mikki and Alisha realized that they need to live together towards the end of the novel.

Key Words: Marriage, Sex, Sisters, Binny, etc.,

INTRODUCTION

Shobhaa De is one of India's best-selling writers, having written fourteen books. She is the first Indian woman to investigate the life of metropolitan women. Her books speak out against patriarchal society, which views women as an afterthought or supplementary to men. Her novels are filled with strong women who are more powerful than males, who are seeking self-actualization and they are sexually free, defying society's conventional setup. Shobhaa De, a passionate feminist, advocates for gender equality and rallies against women's exploitation, oppression, and commoditization.

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Shobhaa De's *Sisters* focuses on the spectacular and fascinating world of business tycoons, rather than the aristocracy of high social circles or the glossy world of the Bombay film industry. De's *Sisters* has an intriguing subject that makes for fascinating reading. Mikki (Mallika), the main character, came home from the United States to attend the burial of her wealthy parents, who perished in an airplane accident. She takes over the complexities of the company from her deceased father and starts to navigate the challenges of the corporate world. She starts to demonstrate her management ability after she steps into her father's shoes. She is quickly surrounded by creditors, takeover tycoons, and untrustworthy friends. Mikki feels obligated to make her father's illegitimate child, Alisha, a partner in the company after learning of her existence, but she finds Alisha to be nasty, hostile, envious, and full of hate for her. Things are already in a bad shape at her father's 'Hiralal Industries'.

Despite her preoccupation with herself, Mikki is desperate to prevent the enterprises from going bankrupt. Mikki attended numerous parties and came into touch with many young and not-so-young people as an educated and young lady without any legal guardian to watch after her. Many young men were interested in her, including Navin, her friend, Shanay, her distant cousin (Anjanaben's son), and businessman Binny Malhotra. Mikki got engaged to Navin after rejecting Shanay. Binny used every trick in the book to win her over. Unfortunately, Mikki's poor financial situation prompted her to seek a loan from Navin before their marriage. Mikki responded swiftly by breaking the engagement when Navin's mother rejected it. Binny took advantage of the circumstances and enticed Mikki away with expensive gifts and promises of financial assistance. Binny, an old man and a former master of lovemaking enticed Mikki to his bedside and compelled her to marry him. Mikki marries Binny despite being warned. Mikki intentionally enters into marriage, which is unexpected while Shobhaa De's other female characters proclivity to break away from the shackles of wedded life. Though she prefers the life of independence, she is not opposed to becoming a wife; nevertheless, she despises the cruel subjugation of women and the confinement of women to the four walls of the kitchen. Binny seems to be completely focused on Mikki at first, who "enjoyed his seasoned...parts of her sexuality she hadn't imagined existed" (*Sisters* 95). She not only gains insight into her true "self" in his presence, but she also feels safe. As a result, she takes pleasure in being his wife. In connection with Mikki's mindset here, De keenly focused on that female protagonist differently that,

She felt liberated, uninhibited, and aroused to the point of primitive abandon. If this was what her man wanted, if this was what made him happy, should give it to him. She would give him every bit of herself, her body, her mind, and her soul, she was in love with him. And he was finally hers (*Sisters* 109).

This complete surrender, which is a feature of traditional women, contributes to man's supremacy and, as a result, to women's exploitation. Her honeymoon with Binny, on the other hand, will be a disaster. Binny, a womanizer already has a family, and his marriage to Mikki is just to maintain his social status. Mikki, strangely, stays quiet after learning this, since she is uninterested in his previous life. When all of Mikki's belongings are transferred to Binny, the process of dehumanization starts. Furthermore, she is barred from becoming a mother since she is required to be physically healthy for him at all times. Binny, as a symbol of the repressive system, is irritated by Mikki's ambition to participate actively in both his life and business.

Binny revealed his real colours after marriage, and Mikki became a housewife on the spur of the moment. Binny continued to have affairs with women of his choice, and Mikki was shocked to learn that he had a concubine called Urmi and two children with her, a son and a daughter. Mikki was assaulted and forced to flee Binny's home. She returned to her parent's house and decided to procure

Alisha's assistance. Alisha was not in the mood to comply. Alisha, like Mikki, had an independent spirit. Navin and Dr. Kurien were two of her lovers. She was on the verge of death when she tried suicide, but she was saved thanks to Dr. Kurien's care and Mikki's blood donation. They became closer as a result of this event, and they remained together. Binny perished in a car accident, and Mikki was heartbroken. She regained ownership of both her property and that of her late spouse. Shanay rescued her from Ramanbhai's intended murder. Alisha drove her to Geneva, where she was healed. As they chose to marry and put their home in order, the two sisters understood each other, and love won over hatred.

As the plot of the book progresses, both girls remain devoted to their single-minded goal of living a life of luxury, riches, comfort, and pleasure. Mikki is dealing with the aftermath of her parent's tragic deaths in an aeroplane accident. Despite being frantic with concern or sorrow, Mikki maintains her patience and bravery despite society's belief that women's sensitive emotions are more developed, limiting her ability to emerge out of any unexpected news. She bravely forbids her maidservant from crying. "Gangubai, please stop that, she said, what has happened has happened" (Sisters 2)

This self-assurance in the face of such a personal tragedy demonstrates that her autonomous character is not suffocated by her feminine inclinations. De's women, unlike conventional women, are not too emotional. As Simone De Beauvoir says: "Woman is a female to the extent that she feels as such ... It is not nature that defines women; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her account in her emotional life." (p 69)

In this male-dominated society, man has not any distinction between his public and private life, while a woman has to act in both affairs. After this sad demise, being a girl, Mikki has no right to enjoy in public places but as a practical lady, she is not ready to become a hypocrite and to mourn for a long period. Mikki is overburdened with responsibility for her father's whole company after his death, which is regrettably losing money. She tells Ramankaka, her father's confident employee that she wants to meet with lawyers and accountants to find out how her father's businesses are doing. However, he advises her against putting her foot in her father's shoes since it is unsuitable for a woman. Mikki, who has decided emphatically, declares:

Thank you for your advice, Ramankaka. I appreciate...your words. But I'd like you to hear a few of mine now. I can't change my sex, unfortunately. That is the one thing all of you will have to accept. But I... about everything, else ... And I intend to ... I don't expect you...to give up your prejudices - but I want you to know that I will not... stand my way (Sisters 30)

Shobhaa De portrays the breaking up of the institution of marriage within the framework of the society, envisioning total sexual freedom with no concept of loyalty, yet societal norms have always been harsh for women. A man's extramarital affairs are condoned by society because he is self-sufficient. A man is obligated to have coital relationships, while a woman is not socially complete enough to enjoy sexual liaisons outside of marriage. Her desire for a sexual connection is based on the needs of society rather than her feelings. Simone De Beauvoir writes: That is, a woman is not concerned to establish her individual relationship with a chosen mate but to carry on the feminine functions in their generality; she is to have sex pleasure only in a specified form and not individualized. (p.454)

As a result, one of the most stringent taboos prohibits women from having extramarital relationships, yet De's woman is unafraid to live a licentious existence. Mikki and Alisha, Shobhaa De's protagonists, enjoy sexual relationships with whoever they choose without regard for rules of behaviour or societal norms. Another surprising husband-wife connection is revealed in 'Sisters'. Marriage does not make a man and woman in oneness. It makes them partners in love. Most men and women are susceptible as a consequence of economic independence, promiscuity, and unrestrained desire coming from: "the thirst of the blood," and the ensuing dissatisfaction in life engulfs them. The woman works tirelessly to love and win her guy, while the husband consistently fails to live up to his wife's expectations. Mikki turns to Binny Malhotra after realizing that her initial love with Navin could not fulfill her expectations and Shanay would not be a suitable spouse. She enjoys sex before marriage and marries him despite Amy, Shanay, and Ramanbhai's wishes. Mikki loves Binny with all her heart, leaves her business in his hands, and aspires to be a decent wife despite being educated in America and progressive in her thinking and conduct. Binny returns her affection and devotes his whole attention to her: "she enjoyed his experienced approach and found herself discovering aspects of her own sexuality she hadn't guessed existed." (Sisters, p. 95).

On the contrary, her dream to enjoy the fruits of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. She begs and pleads innocence and worships earnestly: "Binny, why? Why are you doing this? What have I done? I love you. Only you. I'm innocent. Please Binny ... I can't...you." (Sisters 141). Mikki is an ideal wife whereas Binny is a callous and indifferent person whose irresponsible behavior destroys the human bond between the wife and the husband.

"Weddings are a necessary social evil," (Singh 313). This is something that isn't often seen on reciprocity. This traditional form is considered a female-only service. This patriarchal culture expects a woman to submit to her husband's wishes. Simone De Beauvoir remarks "Men do not marry for themselves, whatever they may say; they marry as much, or more, for their posterity, their family." (454)

Most women subject themselves to household responsibilities and spend a lot of time performing mundane and tedious tasks rather than doing anything creative. Mikki is devoted to her spouse and marriage, yet she is forced to believe in women's subjugation. She does not want to be confined inside four walls of a home a though she is progressive and pragmatic woman, but Binny, as a symbol of this strict social structure, does not allow her to work outside. Mikki's position in the novel sheds attention on the patriarchal society's harsh reality. It also alluded to rising consciousness among women, who are beginning to awaken from their everlasting sleep and take command. Mikki's unwavering opposition to Binny stems from her natural yearning for independence. Ironically, she never considers a life outside of her marriage. The novel's moral component comes from her desire to be both an ideal wife and a responsible social being. Materialistic joys are meaningless to Mikki if she does not have the freedom to be herself.

Shobhaa De's women, in reality, are no longer bound by economic restrictions. Personal independence is what they want, and when it is denied to them, they become rebellious. They vent their rage by engaging in what might be considered immoral behavior, such as violating marriage vows or engaging in extramarital affairs. Mikki's encounter with Binny provides her with insight into her own being as a woman and a person. When Mikki devotes her attention to her estranged sister, one can see her metamorphosis from a simple social butterfly to a mature lady and a loving mother-figure is evident. Mikki is ready to be the perfect wife, but Binny, a cold-hearted guy, just sees her as a means to an end. She is fair and square in her dealings, but she never wants to fall victim to Binny's

strange cravings. However, when the issue of her independence is brought up, she is willing to end her marriage in order to escape the archaic ideals. She doesn't want to give in to her husband's irrational whims. De's woman, unlike conventional women, is no longer restricted to the reproductive role or controlled by male guardianship. Marriage has traditionally been seen as essential for a woman to provide relief for her family, fulfill a man's sexual demands, and care for his home. However, if De's female characters do marry, they will want to enjoy life to the utmost. They will not pretend to live silently if their marriages are not functioning according to their standards.

One of the main characters in 'Sisters', Alisha, has crossed the line of the sexual convention without any social or moral repercussions. Her sexual experiences with several guys are described in detail. The depiction of sex in such minute detail. De seems to disrupt society's traditional or customary routine. Shobha De herself says, "I don't know why there is so much noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex," (De on BBC, int.) These heroines are not ready to obey these superficial social rules, which are made by man for woman. In the present novel, not only these socialites are busy having extra-marital affairs, but a middle-class working woman, Tarini has also indulged herself in such type of relationship beyond marriage.

However, in today's metropolitan environment, sex has devolved into a rough bed where no permanent relationships are formed unless when flesh meets flesh. The novel 'Sisters' depicts women as victims of masculine emotions. Seth Hira Lal, a married man, raped his watchman's wife, who was forced to have an abortion. Alisha is his daughter from the Leelaben he has retained. Binny Malhotra has a mistress and children, but when he marries Mikki, he makes her get an abortion or he would divorce her. He wants to turn her into a gorgeous toy woman instead of giving her freedom and personality.

Society's established norms limit a woman's ability to present herself as a necessary partner in a sexual relationship. She is trained not to show her desires and to engage in sexual pleasures with abundance. She does not have the freedom to express her sexual desire in this subservient position because of societal taboos. But De's woman, who creates her own culture, is equally responsible for this societal norms. Society assumes that a woman does not necessarily want for physical existence, despite the reality that sexuality is a unitary characteristic as important to a woman as it is to a man. A woman in heterosexuality is an inert person; she is no longer a living, self-willing creature.

Because of the discrimination of two sexes in a sexual association where man has a sense of superiority and woman annoys for her passivity imbues a woman with heterosexuality, "Woman feels inferior because the requirements of femininity do belittle her." (De Beauvoir 428) Whereas "Woman's homosexuality is one attempt among the others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh." (De Beauvoir 426) Neena Arora in her article, "An Analytical study of Sisters" says: "The plot sounds good, rather perfect for a super-hit Hindi formula film with well measured doses of suspense, romance, imported locales, sex, drugs, accidents, rape and love-hate relationship finally ending on a happy note" (The Fiction of Shobha De, 216-17).

Hence 'Sisters' is a fine study of the traumatic experiences of a woman caught up in the whirlpool of complex human situations. Though the novel has followed good formula of plots, the tumult which Mikki faces has shown the stamina of women in the business world in compliance with the ebbs and tides of societal problems.

In De's novels, however, they demonstrate exceptional bravery and fortitude in times of adversity. They don't give up, and they don't accept defeat. Instead of being emotional, they are

logical and pragmatic. Because of their uncontrollable influence over economic matters, women's status in the household and society was not equal to men's. They are subjected to all tedious housework and are not allowed to consider their pleasure. Shobha De's Mikky and Alisha, on the other hand, are not financially dependent on anybody. Many times throughout the novels, they offer a lesson of self-awareness. Finally, being a woman, De is more concerned with women's problems and sufferings. She brings to light an important truth that makes us aware of the suffering of women and the injustices perpetrated against them by their patriarchal counterparts. Her novels are protest novels against a male-dominated Indian culture that denies women the right to express themselves and make decision. They are suffocated by a plethora of man-made standards and circumstances that victimize and subjugate them in various ways. They become rebellious as a consequence of their oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Finally, while observing the current climate of gender inequality, a study of these novels may help us broaden and focus our thinking on major issues facing women in Indian culture.

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