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Contents

■	Top Down Peace-Building in Kashmir, 1989-2014 — A Javid	5
■	The Bard on the Bank of Dulung and Beyond: The Evolution of the Idea of “Home” in Jaydeep Sarangi’s Select Poems from <i>The Wall and Other Poems</i> and <i>Faithfully, I Wait</i> — Abhishek Roy	29
■	Locating Khadi and Village Industries in India: The Quest for Ideology, Self Reliance and Equality — Adrita Gogoi	36
■	Subversion of Sexual Subalternity and Masculinity Through Lesbianism in Shobhaa De’s <i>Starry Nights</i> and <i>Strange Obsession: A Critical Study</i> — Anjan Saikia	45
■	Community Conservation and Management of Natural Resources: A Study of the <i>Sattras</i> in Assam — Ankita Dutta	51
■	State Intervention and Changing Land-Use Pattern : A Study of Khasi Hills — Ankur Saikia	60
■	Bodo-Adivasi exodus and its challenges towards Adivasis: A study of Bodoland — Ankur Protim Mahanta	66
■	Community Service Attitude among Tribal College Students of Kamrup (Rural) District, Assam — Atul Chandra Baro	74
■	Transgender Empowerment in Manipur: Role of the Community Based Organisations — Shamjetshabam Babeena Chanu	80
■	Being in the Borderland: Naaratives from North East India — Dr. Bhupen Chutia	86
■	Impact of Goods and Service Tax (GST) on Indian Agriculture — Danswring Basumatary	96
■	Constructing Women: Gender Inequality and Assamese Folk Culture — Debajani Gogoi	101
■	Good Governance and Its Challenges: A Study on India — Deepjyoti Dutta	108
■	Poverty as a Challenge to Human Security: The Indian Scenario — Diganta Kalita	115
■	Education, Age at Marriage and Work Participation among Females in India — Girimallika Borah	120

Subversion of Sexual Subalternity and Masculinity Through Lesbianism in Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession*: A Critical Study

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Introduction:

Shobhaa De is one of the most popular Indian novelists in English. Her novels are clear manifestations of an intimate side of woman's life and their plight in the present day society. Women are usually granted the subordinate sexual position, and thus become subjects of subjugation and victimization. In almost all the novels of Shobha De, the emphasis is put to present the marginalization of women in various fronts in Indian society. By drawing readers' attention to exploitation, discrimination and commodification of women, she rejects compulsory heterosexuality and eventually suggests that women to women or lesbian relationships are better than man to women or heterosexual relationship.

Objectives:

This paper is an attempt to explore the subversion of masculinity and sexual subalternity, and the eventual depiction of the new image of a woman in Indian society by Shobhaa De in her outstanding novels *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession*.

Research Methodology:

In this paper, analytical method is applied to study the novel *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession* by Shobhaa De. In this process, both primary and secondary data are used in the study. The text chosen for study has served as the primary source of information while the secondary data are taken from edited books, essays and other such similar sources.

Feminism can be simply termed as a struggle against the denigration and control of women by patriarchal and capitalist imperialist world system. Apart from sharing the needs of other women like economic exploitation, sexual imprisonment, denial of decent health facilities and inadequate access of children to educational institutions, Lesbianism also operates in the area of sexual expression and oppression and the consequent threats to the economic and social system. Lesbianism succinctly challenges the institution of heterosexuality through which women in the society are forced into male dominated social relationships. In other words, lesbianism challenges the unequal relationships of women with men and works towards reordering the bases for relationships between men and women. In short, lesbians usually reject patriarchy and heterosexual privilege and by making this choice lesbians wish to say something to other women and thus refuse to allow them to be co-opted by their male counterparts. Hence lesbianism can also be a form of revolt of woman against society and its norms which underrate women.

The word 'lesbianism' has its derivation from the Greek word "Lesbiaos" a Greek island in the Aegean sea which was the native place of Sappho, the 7th century B.C. lyric poetess who addressed her love poems to women. In the famous Hindu erotica named *Kamasutra*, lesbianism has been given a clear position and mentioned as well. Lesbianism today can be reckoned a world wide phenomenon where women seek sexual fulfillment within themselves. It is also in its increasing trend in the conservative Indian society despite most of the societies' lack of recognition to this practice.

Lesbian feminist community emerged in the scene especially in the 1980s. Since sexual identity is particularly problematic in the lesbian feminist community, therefore in lesbianism, questions always loom large about how to define oneself sexually and negotiate sexual identity. In other words, the politics of sexual identity is a core issue for the lesbians and thus, these women resist defining themselves solely on the basis of sexual behaviour and negotiated identity. Moreover lesbian identity is multi-faceted and therefore, it is primarily not just sexual.

Women novelists have made a significant contribution to the contemporary Indian writing in English. In their novels, they have maintained a high standard by experimenting with the form of the novels and also expressing their agonies. They, in fact, have made use of the novels to analyze, interrogate and highlight the current problems in their society. Such Indian women novelists in the post-independence period as Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Shobhaa De have openly deliberated on the free play of sex, homosexuality and lesbianism in their novels. In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy dexterously presents the silences of women and their eventual victimization in the patriarchal set up. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur deliberates upon the mother-daughter relationship in a realistic manner. Virmati in the novel has no reservations about the game of sex before marrying already married Prof. Harish and later she becomes his second wife by refusing to be labeled as a victim of the world. Again, in her another novel *A Married Woman*, she deals with lesbianism bypassing the limits of the Indian social code of conduct.

Born in Maharashtra on January 07, 1948, De graduated from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and thereafter, she started the journey of her career in different fields. While working as a journalist she brought out three magazines namely *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity* and later started working as a freelance writer. Conceiving the extramarital affairs of women as the stroke to break the tradition and moral values in society, she highlights different perspectives of women's freedom and liberation. The daring and courageous women characters in her novels establish that reversal of roles is, indeed, possible for women in the present day society.

Shobhaa de is, thus, a widely read contemporary Indian writer in English. In her novels, she reflects the upper class urban milieu particularly that of women. De in her novels focuses especially upon the elite and upper class women and brings into light the stresses and strains in the aftermath of the challenges of transition of Indian society from tradition to modernity. In other words, De presents the picture of women in a modern, developing, changing and conflict torn Indian urban society. She pinpoints the conflict happening between the opposing tools of tradition and modernity between Indian and western ways of living and between the desire of a woman for autonomy and her need for nurturing.

In her novels, the women characters are different from the ordinary traditional rural women. Her women belong to cities having high status and own way of living and thus, have a free life from all kinds of clutches of patriarchal rules prevalent in the rural society. Her treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that through her novels, she actually propagates free sex and female behaviour as a means of women's emancipation. The real concern of De behind such female

sexuality is only to expose the much vaunted restrictions imposed on women and the necessity to bypass those with great immediacy through the accomplishment of something unusual.

In her novels, the women pose as very calculative about the mundane things and use as a means to become affluent and popular. She has raised in her novels the female sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for women in the traditional Indian society. Most of the women, according to De, are sex oriented and sex-centered in the male dominated society. In short, the women characters that De paints within the ambit of her novels are free from the chains of husband and society, reactionary and rebel, and thus epitomize the images of 'new women' and 'a liberated human being'. Hence De's women have showed the courage to raise their voice against the conventions of society which is usually controlled in Indian society. The women in De's novels are free about their sexual oppression and don't tolerate infidelity on her on the part of their husbands. They are seemed to break all sexual taboos with great gusto in her novels.

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani's sexual desire is given the forefront position. The novel is actually a saga of a young girl who has encountered every sort of situation in order to become a successful star in Bollywood. In the novel *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani goes against the compulsory heterosexuality in the Indian society. In heterosexual relationship, usually the man gets the upper hand, and in most of the occasions, women have no guts to voice or react judiciously to their partners' feelings of fulfillment of sexual desires. Through lesbianism, women are engaged in denouncing man as unimportant even on the sexual front.

In *Starry Nights*, the protagonist is a journalist and becomes friend of Aasha Rani who was busy for in her own world. Linda, the journalist calls for an interview of Aasha Rani for the magazine "Showbiz". In reply to that, Aasha Rani said that she would have to ask her mother before consenting upon that. That overdependence of Aasha Rani on her mother made Linda laughing and that smartness showed by Linda attracted Aasha Rani towards her in a great way. Linda even says:

you are so young. So beautiful and so successful. Had I been a man I would have wanted to marry you" (*Starry Nights*, 75).

Aasha Rani appeared nervous and looked towards her Amma and after knowing that Linda is a journalist, Aasha Rani felt privileged and flattered. However, Amma offered warnings to Aasha Rani about Linda, but Aasha did not listen to that. She heard about the interview of Linda with Akshay and this is how she became hugely interested in Linda.

In the first night that they reached in Manali, there was bitter coldness. Once outside in such coldness, Linda suddenly grabs Aasha Rani and closely hugged as well as kissed her by saying that "you are a real iceberg yaar" (*Starry Nights*, 78). Having no resistance left, Aasha Rani's entire body is floating and her mind is in adrift. Linda in this context further says:

I've been dying for you all these months. And you are mine at last" (*Starry Nights*, 80).

Such homosexual propensity of them actually goes against the rigid and orthodox marital framework. In heterosexual relationship, a woman has to lose her purity, intellect and personal likes and dislikes for the sake of the male partner. The women in the novels of De are daring enough to use sex as a calculated strategy for getting social and financial benefits. By depicting the confinement of women in India, De suggests that whenever women flout the very shackle of societal morality irrespective of circumstances and ambitions, eventually those women can't escape disaster and consequent suffering. In both these novels, De deconstructs the man made image of a woman and seeks for an alternative female identity in which a woman can play the same role

even in sexual relationship just a man plays and the other can be given the role of a free woman. However, there might be reservations that gender identities can't change on exchange at will.

Aasha Rani's lesbian experience and variant sexual behaviour has great importance in the novel. By engaging in a sexual relationship by embracing in the arms of another woman, Linda makes her flesh warm, provides emotional security, love and certainly sexual pleasure. During the time of their intimacy, Linda says to Aasha Rani:

Let me do to you what no man could have done...This is love making,
not what those bastards do tour bodies' (*Starry Nights*, 117)

In the arms of Linda, Aasha Rani feels greatly comfortable, cozy and happy, and even though she did not approach for such a relationship at first, she also feels the superiority of lesbian sexual pleasures over heterosexuality. Aasha Rani utters in the novel:

Yes, she thought, this is what it should be, tender, beautiful and erotic.
In a way it could never be with a man. (*Starry Nights*, 137)

Again, in Dubai, the heroine of the novel i.e. Aasha Rani "had experienced some of the greatest of her life" (*Starry Nights*, 112) with the Thai girls. In her turbulent life having several sexual escapades and affairs, the lesbian relationship of hers holds an immense significance and provides or bears an emotional oasis. Her lesbianism in the novels has a great forbearance although this is not exactly central to the novel.

Again, in her novel *Strange Obsession*, the lesbian relationship between Amrita Agarwal, a budding model and Meenakshi Iyengar, a lesbian has been given a forefront position and thus the novelist questions the traditional institution of marriage and sanctity of normal sexual relationship between man and woman.

In *Strange Obsessions*, Shobhaa De brings into light a strong case where we have specimens of a woman who is the victimizer and another one who is the victim. As described in the novel, the rule of Minx badly oppresses the protagonist of the novel viz. Amrita. Minx re-fashions herself and becomes a materialistic, lusty and liberated figure and made Amrita a subject to hers. The all dominating and powerful Minx has compelled Amrita, a young super model, to undergo a sickening experience. Since women are not nurtured flowers in the hands of man, therefore in such a pretext heterosexuality might be rejected. But another question looms large in this context-do women always become nurtured flowers in the hands of their fellow women?

As described in the novel, Amrita unlike Minx was a 'normal' woman with her wishes and expectations, Minx through her lesbian tendencies redefines the roles women can take and acquire in the society. However, it is equally potent to argue that women have an identity of their own and it is within the ambit of their power to act as they like. Minx continues to dominate Amrita on the sexual front and at one point; Amrita seems to be in a state of crisis. On the one hand, she wanted to enjoy life with Minx through the same sex engagement while, on the other hand, she wanted to escape from the clutches of Minx. When Minx made sexual advances at a certain stage, she also enjoyed the same. That happened because of the fact that she could not resist the sexual advances of Minx. Immediately after such sexual relations, she determined not to succumb once again in the clutches of Minx. In spite of that, her lesbian propensity provides her further sexual pleasure from Minx, and this is evident in the novel from her total enjoyment of the "the bathroom sex" (*Strange Obsession*, 156) with Minx.

Amrita might not have such an appreciation for the strange obsession of Minx towards her. But every time when Minx seduces her, she surrenders and puts everything to her. The sexual seduction of Minx to Amrita in the bedroom in Delhi tells many things about the coziness and

pleasure that they enjoy in each other's arms. Again, in Bombay both these ladies live just like husband and wife and even at the stage of superstardom Amrita also engaged in some good lesbian sex scenes. The sexual pleasures that Amrita received from Minx allows her to go against the idyllic set-up of Amrita's mother. When her mother wanted that she should marry an NRI living in New York, she at first refuses that and thought to herself that such an arranged marriage would deprive her from the pleasures of Minx. However, she had to marry to Rakesh, a compassionate person, succumbing finally in front of the social mores.

Interestingly, the husband of Amrita went missing from the hotel room while going for a walking in the morning on the very following day of their marriage. It was Minx who actually worked behind the episode and finally Amrita was able to trace Rakesh in the room of Minx. With the designs that Minx already plotted, she made both the newly wed naked and gave instructions to have sex with each other openly. They had no other option but to oblige at that juncture. She did not stop only in that; rather she wanted to burn them to death and also wanted to kill herself in the process. Rakesh somehow saved Amrita from the blaze but in the rescuing efforts, Minx and he himself received injuries subsequently compelling them to admit in hospital.

Mr. Iyenger stepped ahead at that moment and proved to be the rescuer of Amrita from all sorts of embarrassments. He further convinced her that the photographs and other things which might be detrimental to her have been damaged already. Getting such assurances, Amrita this time breathed a sigh of relief and felt safe at the death of Minx ultimately.

Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex* explained two types of categories which are respectively masculine who imitates man and feminine who is afraid of man. In investigating all these issues, she is of the opinion that female who are maltreated and neglected by society usually performs the active role. Such characters add virile qualities in their mode in order to compensate her inferiority. The character of Minx comes in the category of masculine lesbian who plays the active role in her mysterious relationships with Amrita. She intends to absolutely possess Amrita and therefore, she could not tolerate Amrita's relation with Rover. The men of Minx not only beat Rover but also threatened to death due to his intimacy with Amrita. Her characteristic instinct namely id has turned her attitude into sadism in the novel.

Conclusion:

Thus, the lesbianism as reflected in the novels of De presents a part of the new rebellious women who want an equal footing with man. The engagement of same sex relationships in the form of characters like Linda and Aasha Rani, Minx and Amrita is clearly a manifestation of the new women who seek fulfillment within her own sex. Such a representation is a truthful picture of the new reality emerging fast in the modern world and the increasing number of women who are throwing challenges to men in almost every spheres of human in lesbian activities. Lesbianism, thus, refers to independence which makes women capacious to take care of one's need in a healthy manner. This reality has become a tool of empowerment for many of the women and also assertion of their identities.

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