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**SUBMISSIVE AND NON-SUBMISSIVE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN
SHOBHA DE'S *STARRY NIGHTS***

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Abstract

The novels of Shobha De abound with women characters. Most of them belong to the elite society. Yet, we find a variety in the female characters. Not all of them are dominant and assertive. We do come across women characters that are submissive; who are dominant and some of them are submissive initially but change their stance towards the end. This paper focuses on the submissive and non-submissive women characters in De's novel 'Starry Nights'. An attempt is made to examine their character traits with supporting events from the novel. The change in some characters is traced accordingly.

Key words: *Female, feminism, submissive, non-submissive, dominant*

"I write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without the Feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation."¹

Shobha De's novels present a world of female characters. They are the essence of her work. There are indeed a number of male characters as well scattered through the writing, yet, the emphasis is on female characters. It seems to be her sole motive to portray a woman's world through the novels. One often gets a feeling that she builds each female character with a decided intention. Through each female character she shows or indicates something that is on her mind and something that she wants to express and bring before the world. This is not an uncommon thing for a writer to do. We come across characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Sudha Murthy who are obviously portrayed in a specific way so that the writer can convey certain opinions about women.

Rukmini in Kamala Markandaya's 'Nectar in a Sieve' and her daughter Ira are two such characters. Rukmini is a typical Indian woman; a perfect wife who tolerates every folly of her husband but continues to respect him. She does not change throughout the novel and remains faithful to him till the end. Gita in Rama Mehta's 'Inside the Haveli' is too obviously created to throw light on various aspects of culture, customs and the condition of women caught in a phase of transition. The protagonist of 'Gently Falls the Bakula' by Sudha Murthy is an example of how a plain and simple girl changes during the course of the novel and learns to assert

herself as a result of circumstances which she has to endure. Mahashweta in the novel bearing the same name is another significant example. Sudha Murthy moulds every woman character adding circumstances to her life in order to convey a message. The same seems to be true in almost every female character designed by Shobha De. Maya in the novel 'Second Thoughts' is submissive initially but learns to assert herself later. Swati in 'Snapshots' is non-submissive to people or circumstances throughout the novel. In this paper, the researcher has analysed the female characters in 'Starry Nights'. The researcher has examined each important character in detail and tried to figure out the writer's intention in creating the character.

The main character in 'Starry Nights' is Asha Rani. She enters the tinsel world accompanied by her mother. An innocent young girl from South India, she is forced into accepting and adopting the lifestyle of film heroines. Her mother literally pushes her into the profession about which she has no idea. She sleeps with producers, pleases her male partners and does everything that females are expected to do in the glamorous and thriving world of cinema in Mumbai. Transferred from a simple, middle class life in the South to the glittering world so suddenly leaves little time for Asha Rani to take stock of her life. She is led by her mother and gets quick success. She begins to earn a lot of money and settles down to the life of a typical heroine. Her ambitious mother manages her career and also her property and wealth. She does not hesitate to encourage her daughter to compromise to any extent in order to remain at the top of the industry. Obviously, this could not have been possible if Asha Rani would have been a dominant, assertive woman with her own ideas and opinions. The fact is that she was taken so unawares that she did not get time to think for her own self.

Asha Rani on her part obeyed her mother meekly and played her part without grumbling. Yet, she always felt a vacuum in her life and sought a companion for herself, one who could look beyond the professional sphere. She found this fulfilment in the company of Akshay, who was also the hero opposite her. The two of them made a great pair on the screen as well as in life but unfortunately, Akshay was a married man with children and he had to maintain his image even for getting good roles. He could not compromise with his family and his career for the sake of Asha Rani.

Money and success came easily to Asha Rani and so much that she cared little about it. The obvious end came sooner than expected and she became frustrated with her life, with her work and with her unsuccessful love affair with an actor who was already married. Asha Rani does not have the slightest feeling of guilt in tying down Akshay or Abhijit Mehra to her. The former is a middle aged, mature husband and father of two sons; the latter is a newly wedded young man who has to be pulled down to senses by his father. Asha Rani does not care either for Akshay's wife or Abhijit Mehra's wife or father. For her, the prime concern is a physical relationship with them. Other things like wife, children, parents or families do not count. It was as superficial as her relationship with other sex partners. *Starry Nights* is a celebration of sex, and to some extent, a sex manual.

Her wayward life and superficial relationships take her abroad where she accidentally meets Jay. While married status is never an issue with Asha Rani, the only real legal physical relationship she maintains consistently and seriously is with her Australian husband Jay. It is through this relationship that she is blessed with her only child, a daughter and gave Asha Rani the happiness of becoming a mother. However, the glittery starry world absorbed her into its folds once again and she could not resist it. Her break up with Jay did not affect her deeply though, because though they had enjoyed a family life together for 5 years, it lacked real depth. Getting married to Jay is the only decision about her personal life that Asha Rani takes on her own, probably because her mother was not around. The 5 years spent with Jay can be considered the best five years of her life when she got an opportunity to live the life of a normal woman, playing the role of wife and mother. That little independence she gets is the period when she is not dominated by her mother or her profession. However, she is as submissive as ever, with the difference being that Jay was very kind and understanding so there was never any need to oppose him or assert her. "Marriage is worth if only you think so, not otherwise. You have to believe in marriage. If you don't, or if you look at it as a career option, then you're better if staying single. I hate using the word 'compromise' in any context ----- least of all marriage -----. Marriage is neither an ego trip nor a power trip."²

All the good and bad experiences in Asha Rani's life teach her in the end that relationships based on mere physical attraction are skin deep and short lived. When

she becomes caring and responsible towards her parents and sister at the end, she discovers the real secrets of happiness, the value of relationships and experiences a sense of doing something worthy in renovating the studio. Asha Rani never had a special attachment with her father (who had abandoned her mother) as a small girl; yet, at a later stage of maturity, she finally agrees to see him. She visits her father's place with Jay and Sasha. She pities the old man and takes his charge as there is no one else to do that. The trust and faith, the love between father and daughter that we see blooming at that late stage in life is also an instance of genuine father-daughter relationship. In reviving the studio, Asha Rani sensed a satisfaction and fulfilment as she had never done before throughout her life. There is too much sex in the novel and many a readers may find pleasure in reading it but it is guilty pleasure.

This last noble act on the part of Asha Rani can be taken as a change in her. She did take charge of her life like a sensible woman. Even in this act, she does not seem to be aggressively dominant or non-submissive like some other characters of Shobha De, especially her sister Sudha who stands in sharp contrast to her. Not satisfied by introducing one daughter in Bollywood, Asha Rani's mother's next move is to bring her second daughter Sudha to Mumbai. The ground was favourable for Sudha because Asha Rani was abroad and had left a vacancy in cinema. Sudha Rani is pushed up the same ladder of success by the contriving mother, following on the footsteps of her sister. Sudha Rani is a step ahead of Asha Rani and more selfish. Once she climbs the success ladder, she cleverly gets rid of her mother. She masters the way of success through sex very soon and becomes rich and popular very quickly.

While Asha Rani allowed her mother to take charge of her life including fiancés, Sudha Rani does not encourage her mother at all. She lives independently in her own house, dates with a man of her choice and manages all her finances and career. She is an example of a non-submissive character. She is strong and determined and thinks for herself. She does not tolerate interference in her life from anybody. She poses as Asha Rani's rival and does not care about the relationship with her family members. She is reluctant to take up any responsibility of her parents. She is not sensitive or sympathetic like her elder sister. She could have never lived a married life like a normal Indian woman because she is not ready for compromise. Compromise is vital in Indian marriages.

Most women characters in the novels desperately try to get joy and success. In the process, they suffer at the hands of men and their disloyalty. They have to surrender their ego by compromising with their bodies. There is nothing respectable about sex performed for commercial purposes. Krishna Agarwal has pointed out, "Shobhaa De's women characters suffered in heterosexual relationships due to lack of experience, maturity and the neglect and non-cooperative attitude of their husbands."³ Most women characters in De's novels begin as dependent daughters and fight their way up to success, high position and wealth through the medium of sex. One gets an impression that sex is the only ladder easily available for women to reach heights of success, irrespective of their hard work or talents. This is true in the case of Asha Rani, Sudha Rani, Karuna and many others. In De's novels, there is sex but no passion, no feelings, no fidelity and no genuine joy in the man woman relationships. Female sexuality is a recurrent theme in the novels.

The third important character in the novel is Asha Rani's mother. She is a unique character and difficult to be unfathomed. Well through a married life with two grown up daughters, it is strange that she takes the responsibility of shaping her daughter's career without giving a thought to her husband. She must be clever because she realizes the potential of her daughter and takes her to the right place. She must be a brave woman to land up in a new metro city without any contacts there and knock the doors of the hardest industry to conquer. She is discrete, cunning and designing and knows the way her daughter can gain access to Bollywood. Although uneducated, it is surprising that she does not hesitate to force her innocent daughter to have physical relationship with men in order to get work. She knows which producers were to be encouraged and which not. In her discretion and wisdom lies her assertion.

However, considering all the events in the novel from beginning to end, it can be said that Asha Rani's mother is not entirely non-submissive. While Asha Rani was away, she had to face hard times financially. She could not get the same financial support from her younger daughter. She succumbed to the circumstances mutely. She did not appreciate Asha Rani's moves towards the end but she did not take any objection. Perhaps she had realized that she had monitored Asha Rani's life enough and would not be tolerated any longer. She was shocked when Asha Rani suddenly quit her career when she was at the top but could not do anything about it. She was neutral in

her acceptance of her foreign son-in-law Jay and her grand-daughter Sasha. Thus, she can be categorized somewhere between the two extremes. She is partly submissive and partly non-submissive, depending upon circumstances.

Akshay Kumar's wife belongs to the non-submissive category. She is well aware that her husband is a film hero and is bound to meet screen partners and have affairs with them. However, she is seriously concerned about his special relationship with Asha Rani. She does not approve of it because she is worried about his image which might be ruined. She is also worried because her children could be affected negatively and perhaps the family would be broken up. Fortunately, Akshay Kumar realizes his folly in time to save his image and his family. Akshay's wife does take some steps to assert herself especially after getting lip sympathy and unconcerned, unsought advice from so called well-wishers.

It can be concluded that within a single novel 'Starry Nights', in spite of the limited scope to introduce too many characters in the elite society on which she focuses, Shobha De has presented an assortment of female characters. In the elite world too, women often have to be submissive and accept life and facts. It is necessary to think of family, children, parents and not always remain engaged in selfish activities. Somewhere, one gets convinced that Shobha de cares about relationships. Even though submissive, Asha Rani learns these lessons and takes wise steps in the end. The non-submissive women have to bear the consequences of their actions which are invariably harsh. According to Bimal Das, "Shobha De dives deep into the hearts of liberated, upper-class women in the contemporary society and depicted her characters as they are and not as they should have been."⁴

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