

SHOBHAA DE'S SISTERS: A TALE OF TWO INDIVIDUALS WITH A DIFFERENCE

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Abstract: This paper intends to analyse the two women protagonists Mallika Hiralal (Mikki) and her half- sister Alisha and compare their social positions in Shobhaa De's novel *Sisters* (1992). The novel is set in the background of Mumbai, the city of dreams that can also be considered one of the most significant mines of new, urban-feminism in India. This paper discusses how different circumstances shaped up their personalities, emotions, ambitions, and the entire life. It also focuses elaborately on the features that set Mikki and Alisha apart from the other contemporary protagonists. They are not merely any fictional characters but represent the rise of new urban Indian women, who do not merely yearn for acknowledgement, freedom, love, and appreciation but can challenge the existing social values and norms that position women as the second gender.

Keywords: Protagonists, personalities, illegitimate, rebellious, challenging, male dominated, modern.

INTRODUCTION

“The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”- is a famous saying and Shobhaa De through her protagonists proves to the world that women are not only great rulers of their domain i.e. - their homes but also manage their careers efficiently. They know how to manage their personal and professional lives. They also know to fulfil their responsibilities as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters and daughters-in-law. These women are ambitious, competitive, defiant and modern yet they are very loving and caring. The victory of the novelist is in the psychological portrayal of two women-far different yet so close in terms of their personalities, dreams, ambitions, and shortcomings. Like all feminist writers of her times, Shobhaa De demands respect for women by empowering them to cross the boundaries of gender, caste, professions, colour and creed. De reiterates the power of a woman who is a multi-task and manages to balance both her profession and hearth. De's women are very strong emotionally and even when there seems to be an emotional dilemma, they can attain the control quickly. A slight slip unconsciously makes them lose their logical sense and that leads to their downfall and that's how they become the victims to emotional upheaval. Women in Shobhaa De's works are not all born with a silver spoon but the journey each of these undertake, is a journey of strength, resilience and an instinct to survive. De makes no attempt to portray both the ladies, Mikki and Alisha, in *Sisters* as a perfect example of femininity. When Mikki discovers a crucifix installed at Alisha's place, she says:

“it's just that I did not know you had that religious side to you. Have you always been a believer?...Such a devout one?”(PP304)

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They have their own flaws and De does not shy away from these. They smoke and consume alcohol, have sexual fantasies which were arguably only entitled to men in those days, and can use shrewd tactics for their financial benefits. In other words, they are like many other women who have their characteristic strengths and weaknesses. In the coming sections, the researcher explores various facets of the lives of Mikki and Alisha.

DE'S PROTAGONISTS IN SISTERS

De's women characters in *Sisters* resemble the modern, westernised urban women whom we may not come across in our day-to-day-life. They are a cut above the image of traditional Indian women who live their lives behind the curtains of traditions, compulsory sacrifices, and the expectations from them. In this way, they come as a refreshing air to the readers who were repeatedly coming across suppressed, tortured, and restrained women.

Mallika Hiralal, known as Mikki is from a wealthy background. Being the only legal heir and socially accepted daughter of Seth Hiralal, she can afford to study in America. When the story unfolds, we are introduced to Mikki who returns to India leaving her studies in the US as she loses both her parents in an air-crash. On seeing the charred bodies of her parents, Mikki does not react like an ordinary woman. She controls her emotions and handles the situation very well. Her strong personality is impressive and it is noticeable. She is not inclined to the ritual mourning on funeral if she does not feel the need to do so. She is very mature for her age and practical to the core. She even warns her domestic help not to cry:

“Gangubai please stop that....What has happened has happened.”(pp3).

Mikki is modern in her attitude towards life and defies the age-old custom of wearing a white sari for the funeral. The author who created this type of rebellious women seems to be supporting them:

“Mikki hated white, God, she hated it.” (pp409)

Born out of unannounced relations of Seth Hiralal with Leelaben, Alisha is also De's new woman. She lives in the suburbs of Bombay and is deprived of the luxuries of life. She is very unfortunate when compared to her half-sister Mikki as she is the illegitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal. Seth never acknowledged Alisha and her mother publically or legally. Therefore, they lived a life which left a lot to desire. They are not entitled to any financial or social benefits after his demise. Alisha like her half-sister Mikki is a brave, confident and strong-willed character. She is in grief not because she lost her father but because she lost her opportunity of going to America for her higher studies. She is a tough and determined young lady who decides to make up her loss. She wants to make it official that she is Seth Hiralal's other daughter. She knows how to achieve what she wants. Her attempt to grab

her position in Hiralal's family forcefully as she can never get it legally reveals her strong will and perseverance. Through her monologues and dialogues, Alisha also stands up for the liberation of women in sexual matters. She is not hesitant about sleeping with several men if it pleases her or helps her in achieving her goals. There is a web of moral values that stops her from attaining what she desires. Standing up for Alisha and her several other women protagonists, De herself wonders why there is so much of noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex.

THE SIMILARITIES IN MIKKI AND ALISHA

Mikki and Alisha are equally courageous, intelligent, unorthodox, and even rebel in their persona and conduct. They are neither weak nor subdued like the traditional Indian women of the 90s. Mikki is focussed and controlled whereas Alisha is impulsive and temperamental. Their goal is to be wealthy and live life on their own terms. To both the women their father's demise does not matter much. Both are very practical and self-centred. Mikki wishes to go back to America to continue her semester and Alisha wants to grab the huge material wealth that her father has left behind. Both of them do not want to waste time in mourning their father's death and going through the rituals that follow. Their ambition and purpose in life is of great significance to both these young women. Mikki is poised, level headed and decisive. Alisha is no less. Mikki does not want to be either patronised or assisted in her work. She is very straight forward and shrugs her father's confidant, Raman kaka aside when he suggests consulting him in business and financial matters. Her confidence and potential are obvious when she talks to Raman kaka:

"Thank you for your advice Raman kaka, I appreciate and value your words. But I'd like you to hear a few of mine now. I can't change myself, unfortunately. That is the one thing all of you have to accept. But I change just about everything else...and I intend to. Fate has left me in my father's shoes. Had I been the son he never had but constantly longed for, perhaps I might have had more success with the likes of you. I don't expect you or the others to give up your prejudices-but I want you know that I will not let that stand in my way. This is going to be my show and I intend running it on my terms. If these old solicitors aren't prepared to talk turkey with me, I'll sack them. That goes for the accountants and anybody else who wishes to treat me like a simple-minded, spoilt, little girl out to playat being a business woman. My genes are the same as my father's even if my gender isn't."(pp 49)

By saying so Mikki breaks the usual orthodox image formed by the society about a girl that she is a mere shadow of a man. She challenges the male superiority and proves to be equally competitive in assuming powers and exercising them. Alisha follows the same suit as she aims to grow in her professional life by studying in

the USA. She feels that her father's death has taken away this opportunity from her. Had he been alive, he would have financed her higher studies, as promised by him. However, after Seth's death, there is no one to honour his promise. Alisha's inability to digest these facts, makes her become hostile and gradually develop hatred towards Mikki who has nothing to do with it.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ALISHA AND MIKKI'S CHARACTERS

Human beings always crave for what they do not have, while not appreciating enough of what they possess. This applies to both Mikki and Alisha. Mikki has been brought up amidst all the luxuries. However, she has stayed away from her family and has not received enough proximity and warmth of love from them. On the other hand, money has been a constant challenge in Alisha's childhood. She lives with her mother. Both of them survive on the meagre sum sent by Seth every now and then as a compensation to keep Alisha a secret from his elite urban business counterparts.

Given these circumstances, Mikki craves for love and affection while Alisha wants riches and fame. Mikki is very sympathetic and patient. As a result she occupies a special place in the hearts of the readers. Alisha's outrageous and jealous nature is seen when she comes across the obituary column which reads about the late businessman, "*Survived by his only child, a daughter Mallika, studying in the US.*" (pp405). She always believes that it is Mallika's presence that denied her the rights which she should have received being the elder daughter of Seth Hiralal.

Mallika on the other hand is kind and wants to have good relationship with her step sister, the only blood relative she has on this earth. Her eagerness to be united with her half- sister is quite obvious throughout the novel. Mikki takes the initiative in meeting Alisha and makes an effort to convince her about the bond that they have whether Alisha likes it or not. Despite Alisha's attempt to shrug her off, she persists:-

"I want us to be friends, Alisha. Just that. Nothing else. I'm reaching out to you as someone who is a part of my life whether you like it or not. You can't just walk away. Not after you know and I know the truth. Why are you so angry with me? What have I ever done to you? We are sisters-nothing can change that, don't you see?" (pp 42)

Even after this initial show-off, Alisha tries to meet her half-sister and stepmother Leelaben more than once. She invites them to her home and establishes the bond that should have always been in place. Mikki being very warm at heart makes no stone unturned in her quest to win Alisha's love and affection after she gets the information about the existence of her step mother and sister. Mikki is at

no fault for the sufferings of Alisha and her mother. However, she feels the guilt and tried to compensate for it, a task that seems impossible even until the climax.

De is criticised for her openness in dealing with sexual matters and the orthodox Indians do not approve of her views on man woman relationships. These sensitive issues are frankly discussed and expressed by De. In the past couples used to make adjustments and women used to ignore certain behavioural problems of men and tolerate their infidelity to a great extent to make their marriages work and last long and forever. But times have changed, people are getting more and more westernised in their outlook, women have become financially very sound and independent. As a result of these changes, couples fail to make adjustments and sacrifices these days to save their marriages. They do not even try to give a chance. The consequences are terrible and shocking. There is a rise in the number of divorce cases, separation, extra marital affairs and breakups. De's protagonists are no different from these type of women who no longer brood over the past, hardly care about it and move on in life. They also look forward to finding male partners and better options.

Mikki's constant efforts in changing Alisha's ill feelings for her and winning her heart bear fruit towards the end of the novel. Mikki trusts only two men in her life- one is Raman Kaka, her father's confidant and the other Binny Malhotra who she is married to. Mikki has reasons to believe these men. She falls for Binny Malhotra because he comes to her rescue when her business was sinking. He offers to help her re-establish it. She finds him very capable of supporting and handling the business affairs. She is enamoured by his looks and supportive words. She makes up her mind to become his life partner and handover the business affairs to him. Like all the other ordinary women who dream about a perfect marriage and a caring husband, Mikki too thinks marriage is a bed of roses. She is able to see the other side of Binny's character and his male domination only when he tries to suppress her by saying:

"In our family women are trained to obey their husbands...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."(pp116)

Mikki is insulted many times by her husband, Binny. She is also forced to abort the child she bears. She has been put through mental stress and agony on several occasions. Shobhaa De's Mikki may be modern, wealthy and affluent, but cherishes great values in her heart. She has great faith in the institution of marriage and warm feelings for Binny. She never ever entertains the thought of breaking up with Binny who imposes his ideas on her, curtails her freedom and insults her. When she is thrown out of the house by her husband, she doesn't want to leave him or break free from the shackles of her married life as she can't live without him. Her devotion to her husband is quite obvious in her own words when she shares her feelings with her friend Amy:

“Trouble is I love the man. Call me a door-mat, a slave, a victim, anything. But I feel hopeless and helpless. It is as if I’ve forgotten what pride is...or even was. He can and does trample all over me.” (pp 497)

Mikki gets a shock of her life when she comes to know about his other family, his mistress Urmi and their two children. Though Binny neither confides in her nor thinks it is important to let his life partner know about his illicit relationship, Mikki tolerates his unfaithful side of life as she really loves him. Male domination is quite clear here again. Simone De Beauvoir rightly says:

“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 Patriarchy they have thought best to keep a woman in a state of dependence; 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).

De seems to agree with Beauvoir’s views. Binny Malhotra’s male domination, the way he treats his wife, Mikki makes the readers realize that it is definitely ‘man’s world’ which the novelist is trying to expose. She is treated like a doormat, accused of infidelity, thrown out of her married home by Binny Malhotra who took over all her companies and property. In fact he was disloyal to her. Mikki’s magnanimous nature, her love and concern for her man deserves appreciation when she refuses stoop down to the level of taking revenge on Binny by hiring business spies to have an eye on her father’s companies which are lorded by Binny Malhotra.

De’s women, though emancipated, seem to respect the institution of marriage. Her women characters belong to elite class of society, they are film stars, models, rich business women yet they get married like any other ordinary woman does because Shobhaa De like Simone De Beauvoir strongly believes in the institution of marriage and is also in favour of the family system. Shobhaa De’s Mikky too, though Independent and extremely capable of leading life all alone, believes and values marriage.

Simone De Beauvoir in her book ‘The Second Sex’ upholds marriage. According to her *“Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered by society. History proves that marriage is essential for the well-being of human society and that celibacy brings ruin upon states.”*

After Binny’s accidental death in a road accident, Mikki’s friend Amy discourages her in making arrangements to perform the last rites or attend the funeral. Mikki being a logical and balanced person ignores her friend’s advice and goes ahead in performing the last rites.

Shobhaa De, a very down to earth and successful writer is known for creating very bold, strong and outgoing women characters in most of her novels. As a crusader of the modern urban Indian feminism, she has a very broad and liberal

outlook towards the society which is obvious and noticeable through the portrayal of her women protagonists. By portraying strong and assertive type of women, she makes the male dominated society realise that women are in no way inferior to men. They are the wonderful creation of God, quiet confident, capable and equally efficient as men. Her intention in creating these empowered women is to make the society realize that women deserve to be respected and treated equally. De's ardent wish is to uplift women, empower them and make them understand what they are entitled for.

CONCLUSION

While Shobhaa De's contemporary Indian women novelists were busy creating women protagonists who were suppressed by the patriarchal values and beliefs, looked for sympathy and support from men around them, De wrote *Sisters* which is a story of two sisters who know how to make their way around all the atrocities around them. A corporate woman's image was not common for the protagonists created by Indian authors in 90s. Like several other women protagonists by Shobhaa De, Mikki and Alisha break many stereotypes of their times. Even though they are two different characters but they essentially represent the plea for liberty for all the other women. They do not merely demand equality but compete against established men to attain their goals. However, their aspirations, ambitions, and struggles do not deter their emotional side. To sum it up, Mikki and Alisha are progressive and liberal urban women who represent the social revolution in India. Their arrival on the Indian literary scene coincides with the new-feminist movement in the country. Therefore, they can be easily considered one of the earliest symbols of this movement.

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