

Shobha De's *Strange Obsession*: A Study in Physiological Need

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Abstract. *Strange Obsession* is one of the best novels of Shobha De which is based on lesbian relationship. The novel revolves around a female character Minx whose childhood was devoid of parental love, care, and attention. She was neglected by her parents. And the worst incident which made her full of death instinct was her rape done by her own father. She developed hatred towards men. But with the passage of time, her physiological need i.e. need for sex dominantly compelled her to become lesbian and trap beautiful ladies for satisfying her physiological need. Amrita's name need to be cited here for whom Minx developed strong obsession which was overt enough. The novel does make its readers understand that to have life instinct and moral development in one's life, one does require parental love, care, attention and last but not the least, sex.

Keywords : Abraham Maslow's need theory; physiological need; obsession; lesbianism .

It is known to all that one cannot be alive without meal, water and air, the basic needs of being. But can a person live his life without sex? It is a question which needs an answer. And yes, sex is a physical need which has great importance. It can be called physiological need. Physiological needs are the physical needs needed for human survival and proper functioning of the human body. These things have been placed under the first level of needs in psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Physiological needs deal with the maintenance of the human body. This lowest category includes the most basic needs that are vital to survival, such as the need for water, air, food, sleep, and last but not the least, sex. Abraham Maslow, one of the major humanistic theorists believed that these needs are the most instinctive needs because all needs become secondary until these needs are met. Possessing a degree in psychology, Shobha De must have gone through Maslow's five stages of hierarchy of needs pyramid.

Shobha De alias Shobha Rajadhyaksha is a well known notable Indian woman novelist, columnist, and free-lance writer. She has composed more than seventeen novels, all of which start with the letter "S"(*Strange Obsession, Starry Nights, etc.*) and are the best sellers, edited three popular magazines – *Stardust, Society* and *Celebrity*. She has also touched the path of journalism in 1970. Her qualities, being a decisive lady, do not end here. Being a lady of B-town, she made

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her career as a model along with a well known female Bollywood actress, Zeenat Aman. She penned down her debut novel, *Socialite Evenings* in 1988.

Being a bold and daring writer, she is well aware of the socialites. She is known to voice her thoughts in her works. In all her novels, women are the central characters. Her novels are X-rated in which women characters always challenge the conventional nature of Indian women. Her approach is different from the feminists of archetypal type. In this regard, De is not a single author to add sex as a segment. The others who have also written on the similar theme include Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala et al.

De's characters belong to the galaxy of aristocrats. They have money in abundance but they lack human emotions and possess huge hollowness. Karan, a male character in *Strange Obsession* says to Amrita, the protagonist :

To me, a model is a model – a subject for my camera. Nothing more. (*Strange Obsession* 1992:11)

De candidly shows that sex, a physiological need plays an important role in balancing the life of a human being. Her female characters crave for sex. They keep illegitimate relations with outsiders in no time for fulfilling their physiological need i.e. sex. In some cases, they become an epitome of whores and sometimes they do not feel ashamed to become lesbian and have a filthy relation with other ladies :

Girls who have been raped by their fathers (and they are not rare among delinquent girls) find relationships with men either threatening or disgusting and often turn to other girls for the fulfilment of their emotional need for love.

(Vats 2010 : 103)

In *Strange Obsession*, we get a glimpse of the first sexual encounter between Amrita and Minx :

Minx removed her clothes one by one and placed them neatly on a chair close to the bed. Amrita was suddenly conscious, very conscious, of Minx's touch as each nerve-ending in her body came alive under her probing fingers and tongue... Minx had taken each one of her toes into her mouth and was massaging them with her tongue, while her hands reached between Amrita's legs and touched her teasing, rhythmic stabs. She felt her legs open almost voluntarily, as Minx climbed upon her, straddling her slim hips with her own, covering her breasts with her hands, cupping the nipples and

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circling them repeatedly till they ached with a
sweet pain... (*Strange Obsession* : 94)

De beautifully expresses through the characters of the novel that everyone does need love, care, affection and sex. If one's life is devoid of such notions, one can't help turning into a rebellious character leaving no stone unturned to make other's life hell. Meenakshi Iyengar, though not the protagonist of the novel, holds an equal importance as Amrita, the protagonist has. She hates patriarchy and men as she had bad experiences in her childhood. She confesses before Amrita :

'I had a lousy childhood'. My father's transfers and my mother's social work left me to amuse myself on my own. Most of my time was spent in the havaldar's *kholis* playing with their children, eating their food, even talking their language . It's the same old rubbish...only child, lonely child, boarding-schools...I was thrown out of two schools...expelled..."If your mother doesn't, you have to," he told me. I believed him. (43-45)

As a matter of fact, the terms between Minx's father, Inspector General of Police, V. S. Iyengar and her busy mother who was a social worker were not good. This resulted into the suffering of Minx. Her father used her as an object for satisfying his physiological need. She bares her bosom before Amrita :

I didn't ask...but he told me...he told me about my mother...that she refused to have sex with him. "I only have you now", he told me. And I felt I had to make him happy. He looked so miserable. I felt guilty...of course, I did. He made me feel it was my duty. You understand?(45)

Consequently she suffered a lot. Her sufferings ultimately changed her into a rebellious character. She started to hate men but she was thirsty enough. To satiate her thirst, she ignored all do's and don'ts and got diverted towards homosexuality. This made her a lesbian. In the words of Sheila, a model, in the novel:

Minx is weird, man. We all know she is a lesbo. (51)

Indeed, Minx wanted to make Amrita, her sex slave. She chases Amrita everywhere. Amrita herself admits :

I have a feeling even if I go and hide away in the Himalayas, she'll find me there. (51)

In fact, Amrita was not the first girl whose life was made hell by Minx for the physiological need. It is revealed from the words of Karan :

There was another beautiful girl – a model – whom Meenakshi had taken a fancy to last year...And then, bang! She was gone. (18)

She troubled Rover (Ranjit Grover) by getting him badly beaten up by the cop and thrown into the lock-up, when she came to know the intimacy between Amrita and Rover. It is revealed from the lines :

Amrita took in her breath sharply at the sight of her lover lying in a helpless heap on the stinking floor of a dark cell. He was covered in his own excrement and had been beaten badly... Rover was unconscious. She could hear his laboured breathing as he lay in the filth, his clothes torn off his body. Rover's eyes were puffed and swollen and blood had clotted on his forehead. (40)

After that Lola, a rival model of Amrita, got trapped in her plot. Minx threw acid upon her to kill her and keep her away from Amrita and her assignment. She says to Amrita :

Don't be silly, baby. The whole world knows. All your ad people are talking about the bitch and how she screwed with you. How could I let her get away with it? Your prestige, your reputation, your image, was at stake. No, no, no. She had to be taught a lesson... (60)

She threatened Sheila also. Then it was the turn of Mr. Parthasarthy. He met with a road accident while driving to his farmhouse on the outskirts of Delhi. Luckily he had a narrow escape. Undoubtedly, Minx, the lady-villain of *Strange Obsession*, had great hatred for the men but she loved Amrita immensely. She says to Amrita:

I'm a Gemini. We do things in extremes. Even love can't be casual. I love you. You don't have to accept that either. I'll just have to keep trying. Keep proving it to you. (42)

Even she wanted to get a marble prayer hall constructed for Amrita. She says :

One day I'll construct a magnificent marble prayer hall at this same spot. It will be for people who have a lot to thank God for.

Shobha De's *Strange Obsession: A Study in Physiological Need*
 People who are filled with love...like I am. All
 thanks to you. It will be a temple of love. To love.
 (107)

Minx went for surgery also to reduce her breasts so that she could get a masculine look and could satisfy Amrita in a better way. She says :

It's a tits-job....Well...most women go to this plastic surgeon for cosmetic surgery to enhance their breasts-boy! I could give you a few names – but I actually asked him to reduce mine. You know, slice them off. Don't ask me why, but I got the feeling you didn't like them – that their huge size put you off. I didn't like them either.(93)

Moreover, Minx's physiological need made her maniac enough. Amrita's magnificent body proved to be a very strong stimulus for her. She got obsessed for Amrita. She wanted to go for sex-change operation also. It is reflected from her words :

I'm planning to undergo a sex-change operation. Yes, darling. I'll do it for you. You want a prick to enter you—I'll go out and get one. Money can buy you anything. I've always said. Even a bloody dick.
 (110)

In her madness for Amrita, Minx goes to the extent of even harming Amrita :

Minx cackled and moved a lit-match over Amrita's pubic hair which crackled and curled when the flame touched it...Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy, Minx laughed pushing the object in and out. (147)

Minx' journey of hurting others did not end here. She also played with the life of Mr. Rakesh Bhatia, the husband of Amrita. She kidnapped him from Nainital where Amrita and Rakesh went for their honeymoon. But as soon as she felt the intimacy of Amrita with her husband, she pulled herself away suddenly and stepped back. Having tears streaming down her face, she says :

You smell of a man... He is all over you. Everywhere. Between your legs, on your breasts, in your mouth. No, I can't touch you ever again. Get dressed, let's move, it's over. (195)

All the human relationships in De's novels are complex and are influenced with

the physiological need of sex which brings problems in relationship – mental illness, thirst, and hunger of sex. What to talk of Minx, even Amrita is not behind. First of all, she fulfilled her physiological need, sex with Rover. Then she got somewhat attracted towards Karan. Later she enjoyed sex with Minx twice, thrice and many more times. In fact she couldn't help falling in love with Parthasarthy, a powerful man and didn't feel ashamed to ask if he was happy with his wife.

In this way, De's novel *Strange Obsession* surprises, irritates, attracts, and sometimes compels us to mistake her but at the same time, it holds our attention up to the end. It is an extraordinary novel in several ways. The chief protagonist, Minx is not a lesbian, she is more than that. So far as the depiction of lesbianism is concerned Shobha De is different from Manju Kapur. Astha and Pipeelika in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* enjoy their lesbian relationship but the relationship between Amrita and Minx in *Strange Obsession* is not smooth. There is always some sort of tension prevailing between the two and Minx's possessive nature is the only reason behind this. Moreover, in modern times, marriage as a primitive institution is on decline in many societies :

Lesbianism and homosexuality are getting wider currency and more and more women are giving in spinsterhood and female friendship and bidding good bye to motherhood and wifehood. (Kumar 2013 : 185)

Indeed, Sigmund Freud's views in this regard are very significant. He thinks that there is no concrete scientific evidence to prove that human beings are either good or bad by nature. They are perpetually on the lookout for pleasure and long for the absence of miseries. Their purpose of life is decided by the "the programme of pleasure principle." (Freud 1964: 163)

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