

## CHAPTER – III

### **Starry Nights: Hope (Aasha) Conquers All**

Shobhaa De, an eminent modern novelist and journalist, has marvellous understanding of the psyche of women and her novels are therefore, dominated by female protagonists, who struggle hard in their lives, break patriarchal order, protest against male dominance and at last come out in flying colours in their quest of self-identity. She specially explored the world of modern urban women of Mumbai with all its overwhelming problems and challenges. Her novels realistically unveil different facets of the life of high society urban woman. She does not believe in describing her women characters as love slaves or mere help mates at home. Her women are sexually liberated and have free thinking. Set against the backdrop of Mumbai film industry, *Starry Nights* (1991) presents before us a realistic study of sex and sexploitation. The novelist, with her first-hand knowledge, distinctively captures the reality of the glittering world of Mumbai cinema which beckons so many young hearts, bubbling with craze, ambition and lust for name, fame and wealth. However, ultimately they are left in the darkness of loneliness, frustration and disaster. The novel presents the chronicle of a young girl, Aasha Rani who catapults to stardom surrendering her body, soul and psyche.

Women writers are involved in redefining the personal and the domestic roles of women all over the world. ShobhaaDe's ideas are consistent with such women writers who are of the opinion that women in general are much disturbed by many aspects of their sexuality, distinctions and varied responsibilities of gender. She emphasizes that proper education is necessary for women to make them self-sufficient and assertive. ShobhaaDe's women characters show that educated and enlightened ones do not surrender to social pressures meekly rather they react against their husbands' hypocrisy without compromising their family lives, while women who are illiterate and dependent submit easily to such sub-ordination.

Various recurring situations and themes depicted in ShobhaaDe's novels are the result of her realism. She has described a particular class of people and a particular aspect of the world of glamour which are deceptive to the core and eventually detrimental to innocent and unsuspecting

young girls and ambitious women. Though the metaphors and images she has used may appear lewd, licentious and cross the limits of decency, but the novelist has described truthfully not only the matter of theme but also through the linguistic expressions, man-woman intimate interaction and the life as she has witnessed. The spirit of post-modernism is expressed so far as contemporary Indian women are concerned especially in metropolitan cities properly and unabashingly through ShobhaaDe's writings. She comes before us with a balanced evaluation of a woman's existential dilemma because she recalls them to fight for their rights, to be economically secure and simultaneously to be aware of her social responsibilities without neglecting, in anyway, her familial duties.

*Starry Nights* lays bare the sour realities of Mumbai cinematic world. The novelist is of the opinion that, it is a fictitious account of Bollywood. She affirms in her autobiography *Selective Memory* that it is slightly based on the romance of Rekha-Amitabh and HemaMalini-Dharmendra. She writes: "Their relationship did provide a take-off point for the novel but was by no means a faithful retelling of their off-screen lives. There are undoubtedly a few shades of Rekha in Aasha Rani, while Akshay is a pale reflection of Amitabh Bachchan" (331-332). Further she admits that the events in the book are not real but are based on reality. The characters in the novel are based on actual individuals whom she has encountered in her life. As in the novel, she illustrates the underworld 'dons' with Shethji and DivyaBharti with Sudha Rani. She has shown through the character of Aasha Rani, how females are exploited sexually in the fashion and women are considered a thing of consumption. Aasha Rani achieves stardom by surrendering her body and soul. The novel brings to the fore all that lay beneath the outwardly glamorous world. Her mother has launched her as a dancer at the age of six and later forced her to work in pornographic films. She spends her teenage amidst the Mumbai film industry where she has been exploited by innumerable people leaving a scar on her tender mind. Getting close to Kishenbhai she confides in him her lonely, deprived, unprivileged childhood who also takes advantage of her. She has experienced various types of sex, both normal and abnormal, even lesbian. She then elopes to New Zealand with Abhijit and on deserting her in an alien land by him, there she marries Jamie Phillips. Her daughter Sasha's birth enlightens her insecure and barren world. She enjoys the feeling of motherhood. Five years later she returns to Mumbai and once again joins the film world. Aasha Rani enjoys the security that marriage brings in her life. After her break-up with Jay, she reconciles

to her family, revives her father's studio and plans to make her daughter Sasha, the future "golden girl" on the silver screen.

Society has always laid harsh rules for woman. A man is most of the time justified by society to have extra-marital affairs. A man can enjoy sexual relationship within or outside marriage but a woman is not considered a socially complete individual to enjoy any sexual liaison apart from marriage. Her desire for sexual relationship is subordinated to the interest of society not on her own feeling. Simone de Beauvoir opines: "That is, woman is not considered to establish individual relation with a chosen mate but to carry on the feminine functions in generality; she is to have sex pleasure only in a specified form and not individualised" (454). Society forbids women to have extra-marital affairs. But chick lit does not explain just the suppression or the subjugation rather it illustrates different experiences of woman's lives, especially relating to family, friendship, workplace and love affairs, which sometimes seem trivial and common placed events. Namita Gokhale, a contemporary of Shobhaa De, in her first novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) deals with the same theme Shobhaa De deals with, in most of her novels. In this novel, Namita Gokhale deals with the upper crust of metropolitan Indian society, where sexual fidelity among partners is replaced by sexual liberty. They change their sexual partners more quickly than their clothes. Shobhaa De's woman is not hesitant to live a licentious life. Both the mainstream characters of the novel Aasha Rani and her sister Sudha Rani maintain sexual relationship with whom they like without any care of codes of conduct and social boundaries. Aasha Rani, the protagonist in the *Starry Nights* has crossed the pool of sexual conventionality without any social and moral instincts. There is explicit and detailed description of her sexual encounters with different men. In *Socialite Evenings* also De has presented the characters of Anjali, Karuna and Ritu as sexually liberated women. Anjali's sexual encounters with different persons even with men less than the age of her daughter are described clearly. Portraying sex in such elaborate details, De seems to shake the orthodox or conventional pattern of society. Shobhaa De herself says, "I don't know why there is so much noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex." (quoted in Dodiya 55). At the very beginning of her career as a film actress, Aasha Rani is sexually exploited by Kishenbhai, a married man. She asks him that why doesn't he take care of his wife instead of warming her bed or if she is not a woman. All men who have sex with Aasha Rani are married men but Aasha Rani is held responsible for all this. Society always blames Aasha Rani, as Malini arranges a meeting with Aasha Rani at Rita's house to rebuke her instead of saying a word to her

husband. In the same way Kishenbhai's wife also curses her, such incidents throw a glaring light on the realities of our society that a woman too is responsible for suppressing other woman. The novel here matches with ShashiDeshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in which the novelist shows how the mother deserts her own daughter and does not meet her even on her deathbed, even though Saru is a competent doctor. Shethji, a politician and an underworld don in *Starry Nights* exploits AashaRani. Further Abhijit falls in love with her passionately but Aasha Rani doesn't give him much importance because he is "a married man with a lovely young wife"(167). It is apparent here that though chick lit heroines are sexually liberated; they are not devoid of morality. Aasha Rani once rebuked him that you come here—"For sex. Nothing else! I'm just your celebrity—just a sexy Madraasi girl with big tits. You are not making love to me! You are screwing my image—my screen image"(167). Akshay and Aasha Rani felt attracted towards each other for sexual fulfilment and Aasha Rani long for care and company from him. She falls desperately in love with Akshay. Akshay betrays his wife by having sex with every heroine he works with and Malini, his wife instead of saying anything to her husband rebukes Aasha Rani for their affair at Rita's house. After her marriage when she comes back to India, she signs a contract for Jitendra Mehta's film. This contract results in an illicit sexual relationship with Aasha Rani and Jitendra Mehta (Jojo). Jojo's wife Neelam sends *goondas* to teach lessons to Aasha Rani. They advise her to stay away from Jojo. One of *goondas* sprains her wrist and warns her, "Stay miles away from Jojo—or the next time I'll spread open your legs and slash your vagina"(322). It is rightly said that if character is lost everything is lost. A person can easily and frankly be criticized with degraded remarks, like Aasha Rani. Through these incidents the novelist wants to highlight the highly adverse effects of illicit and extra-marital relations. No doubt, extra-marital sex is very definitely the post effects of westernization, although even in the west, sober people have always condemned extra-marital sex as lecherous and pernicious. Purity in sex is always emphasized in Indian culture. In Indian culture lust, greed, anger, pride etc. are considered as the gateway to hell. The last man in Aasha Rani's life is Gopalakrishnan, the same man who had abused her when she was an innocent child. He meets her again when she goes back from India to New Zealand and again abuses her sexually in the loo of the aeroplane. Sex for ShobhaaDe's women is palpable, pulsating and hard reality, which places her protagonists under the category of chick lit. Her heroines do not hesitate to accept sex as an important part of life. This marks a shift in the life of woman from the sexually exploited to the sexually liberated. Her heroines are not ready to obey the superficial social rules, which are

formulated by man for woman. They do not remain passive to let man take all the initiative. They think and talk about sex openly. Her heroines turn traditional image of woman upside-down and participate in it actively. In her novels, her heroines are daring to have extra-marital relationships to overcome their mental fatigue.

Shobhaa De diverts from the conventional thought process and opines that women have to assert their independence in order to claim their identity in the society. K. K. Sinha (2000) aptly remarks:

Shobhaa De stands for equal and normal treatment to the woman in this hurly-burly world of ours. She is one of the leading writers portraying the man-woman relationship especially in urban metropolitan India. She stand for the New Woman—casual looking but ambitious, professional, focussed and in control. She has an agenda, and she will towards it single mindedly and even alone if need be. (98)

The journey of woman from subjugated to new liberated woman can be traced in the novel, *Starry Nights* itself. In the beginning of the novel, every word of Aasha Rani used to start with ‘Mummy Says’ but later she starts taking decisions on her own. When she goes to Shethji for the first time, he offers her thirty thousand rupees but she does not take the money. Her Amma rebuked her on her foolishness for not accepting the money Shethji has offered her. But Aasha Rani replied her Amma that she wants to take her decisions her own way. Later she independently takes the decision to marry Jemie Phillips in New Zealand. When she comes back to India after her divorce with her husband Jay, she loses hope but ultimately she gathers her lost strength by recalling Akshay’s comment about making India beautiful and Jay’s remarks that a person should live his life in the fullest sense and not with regrets. Even the farewell letter of Appa boosts her independence a lot. In the last paragraph of the letter, her father reveals that the studio belongs to Aasha Rani. Aasha Rani promises her Appa that she would reopen the studio and the name of her family banner will again flourish. And lastly she decides independently that her daughter will become the super star of the glamorous world of film industry without any involvement of the opinion of her ex-husband or Sasha’s father.

The changes in the personality of Aasha Rani are no exception, in-fact this is common that the heroines of Shobhaa De share with each other. Most of them start as confident women of calibre then turn into love-sick helpless beings and then again change into independent woman

with great love and concern for her relations. Shobhaa De too presents the story of two beautiful young ladies, Mikki and Alisha in *Sisters* (1992), who are liberated, wealthy working women, brimming with confidence and affirmed for their position in society. After her father's death Mikki takes the responsibility of her father's business. To know the standing position of her father's industries, she says to Ramankaka, a confident employee of her father, to arrange a meeting with solicitors and accountants. But he suggests her not to fix her foot in her father's shoes because it is not worth like for a woman. Mikki, who has already resolved, declares emphatically:

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

Here Mikki challenges the usual orthodox ideas of a society which considers women subordinate, not eligible to do any creative work.

The institution of marriage is not regarded as an essential matter in the fictional world of Shobhaa De. But one can easily understand how important marriage is in her personal life. She remarried Dilip De, her present husband, just after ninety minutes of her divorce from her first husband Sudhir in July 1984, because she thinks, "I happen to like being married. I believe in marriage. I enjoy being a wife. I don't want to spend the rest of my life on my own" (*Selective Memory* 475). Secondly, even though she is the first Asian woman to win 'Reuters Fellowship Award,' one of the biggest opportunities for an Indian, she did not leave her family to avail herself of that offer as it amounted to uncertainty, insecurity and alienation in her life. About marriage and space she opines:

The need for 'space' makes marriage sound like a tenancy in a crowded block. Marriage means being together, even at times when the sight, smell and sound of the 'other' drives you crazy. 'Space' connotes escape, but may be, I'm wrong. Space also obliquely refers to a strong desire for privacy, for expressing one's individuality, for putting up invisible barriers around oneself. It's a modern day invention, I don't fully appreciate or understand. Marriage to me connotes commitment and surrender—merging with, blending, overlapping, combining. It is a symbiotic relationship where one feeds on the other, depends on the other, needs the other. There is no room or requirement for 'space.' It's a misleading and mischievous concept that has led to several modern-day marriages breaking up—perhaps because the two people have misconstrued its true interpretation.

Individual in search of vast and unlimited space are better off single—they can have any amount of its staying on their own. (*Selective Memory* 480-481)

Glamorous, independent, and highly challenging socialite women in ShobhaaDe's novels define marriage in new parameters in which mutual fidelity or faithfulness is replaced generally by sexual liberation. Here the concept of chick lit fits in that instead of talking about “marriage of souls” they merely converse on the issues of sexuality. Shobhaa De is quite close to Kamala Das who candidly accepts her infidelity and says in her poem, *My GrandMother's House*,

... I who have lost

My way and beg now at strangers' doors to

Receive love, at least in small change? (14-16)

In a similar fashion Aasha Rani rebukes the wife of Akshay as: “Dear Maliniji, instead of being the *bhabhiji* of the entire industry, try being the wife of just one man. And yes, do suck his cock sometimes—he loves it” (84). Owing to economic independence, women enjoy today, they have changed the basic rules to some extent. If a woman of independent status with a roof over her head chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her emotions of sorrows and happiness in life with someone in the fullest sense, and not because she is searching for a life-long meal ticket. Today divorce can be seen in the light of independent status of women. Now, modern educated glamorous young women in urban India do not prolong bad marriage. Different characters give their views differently about the institution of marriage. Akshay married Malini because he needed a home-maker and a good mother to her children. Kishenbhai, another character in the novel is of the view that men marry for status, prestige and acceptability. Jay is of the opinion that a woman is all about being a good wife and a good mother. In *Socialite Evenings* also the condition of a wife is depicted as an object who can accompany her husband in the parties. Karuna feels annoyed when her husband asks her to accompany him in such parties. She feels bored as everyone behaves hypocritically in such parties and their talk generally centre round frivolous subjects as clothes, fashion and rumours of high society people. But she accompanies her husband out of social obligation. This is how women are equated with the objects of prestige for socialising evenings.

Most chick lit novelists in the west view sex as a necessary element of romantic exploration. Chick lit characters talk and joke openly about sex and genitals. In earlier fiction women showed no interest in sex outside marriage and admitted very obliquely to pleasure within

marriage, while chick lit heroines happily discuss their orgasm and G-spots. Indian society also has formulated rules for women in the matter of sex and she is expected not to expose her need of sex. She is also expected not to participate boldly in sensual activities. Under this servile position, she does not have freedom to express her sexual urge against social taboos. But, Shobhaa De has coined out a different culture of women. Society considers that a female does not long for a satisfactory sex life whereas the fact is that sexuality is a unitary quality as essential to a woman as to that of a man. In heterosexual union, a woman is inactive or passive partner; she is no more an alive being and self-willing person. Owing to the discrimination of two sexes in sexual association where man has a feeling of superiority and woman feels annoyed due to her passivity imbues a woman with homosexuality. While performing sexual act with another woman she does not feel any need of pretence, and this intimacy brings for her a sense of wholeness and satisfaction, which she can't realize in the presence of a male partner.

Modern urban women of contemporary India are no more passive partners in sex as a man wants. In the novel, Aasha Rani has a sexy body and she knows the tricks and pressure points on a male body, which can arouse man to extreme point of excitement. She does not feel any sexual gratification when she performs the act with various persons as—Kishenbhai, Akshay Arora, Shethji, Amar, Suhas, Jitendra Mehta (Jojo), Abhijit and Jay Phillips etc. Kishenbhai is Aasha Rani's first pimp. She feels annoyed at the thought of Kishenbhai, because she feels that it was he who introduced her to this dirty film industry. Shethji is the person who paid Aasha Rani a high price for the use of her body. He is a sadist, who mixed something in Aasha Rani's drink and it has transported her to a hallucinatory world. When she wakes up in the morning, she feels her body aching. She remembers him sticking his big toe into her mouth and hurting her. He crushed ice on her breasts, entered her savagely from behind and whipped her with a small leather thong. Amar is *chicknafaced* boy who has more interest in boys than girls. Suhas proves an impotent. Jitendra Mehta is a very harsh sexual partner and does not do anything to satisfy a woman's ego. She openly admits like a chick lit heroine to Jojo, "Is that all? How long before the main course?" (310). Jay Phillips has married her not out of love but to screw her glamorous image. Abhijit too wants to have sex with her not out of love but to exploit her screen image. But Aasha Rani feels aroused and satiated while having sex with Gopalakrishnan in the loo of the aeroplane but he turns out a terrorist in the end. The novel makes it clear that Aasha Rani is not bound to any



one person in the matter of having sex. Her frank behaviour in maintaining sexual relationship with anybody brings her under the category of chick lit heroine.

Though most of the chick lit novels centre around the heterosexual relationship but some of the novels depict lesbian relationships of their heroines. Lesbianism in the novel is a “counter-revolution” (Tikkha 224) against the foundation of male dominated society, and an expression of women’s desire for equality, liberty and security. It refuses male authority in sexual matter where woman’s feelings and desires for sexual pleasure are not given importance. In sexual field, ShobhaaDe’s women do not want to be dominated as an object or as a subordinate person. Aasha Rani is deceived and cheated by men every time she comes in contact with them and, therefore, her desire for true love and concern grows stronger and stronger. Lesbianism is not the central theme of the novel. Linda provides Aasha Rani her fleshy warmth, security, tender love and sexual pleasure which she had failed throughout to get from any of her contacts with man. She has also felt complete sexual gratification in Dubai also with the Thai girls and had experienced some of the greatest orgasm of her life. This experience was for her the fulfilment of a deep longing, as P. K. Pandeya (2000) writes, “In the turbulent life of the heroine, it was something fulfilling, an emotional oasis”(207). It emphasizes the fact that a woman can be sexually aroused better by a woman in comparison to a man. In a heterosexual union between a woman and man, it is always the man who is more active partner and when the orgasm is achieved and ejaculation takes place, the man feels satisfied, he cools down and does not then even bother about his partner, the woman, whether or not she also feels sexually equally satisfied. In the novel, one single union with Linda leaves such powerful impact on her mind that she blurts out, “it could never be with a man”(137). Aasha Rani feels so much satisfaction with Linda because a woman always finds it easier to surrender to a woman than to a man who is always dominating, chauvinistic and exploitative to a woman. In ShobhaaDe’s *Strange Obsession*(1992) too, homosexuality finds an elaborate description. The novel depicts its heroine’s lesbian relationship with Minx, an eccentric and psychologically sick woman. Amrita, an ambitious young lady comes to Mumbai to become a model and comes into contact with Minx. Minx’s sexual obsession for Amrita is so strong that she cruelly and sadistically attacks on Ranbir, Lola and other persons who try to do anything in favour or in opposition of Amrita. Her remark shows her intensity of desire for Amrita:

Why what more do I have to do to prove myself? kill? I’ll do that too ... may be then you’ll love me. ... Will that make you happy? Will that please you? Then I’ll

do it just tell me to and I'll do it. I'll kill myself. I'll give you my life—what more can I give you? (62-63)

This type of condition is the result of certain experiences as psychological, physiological condition and social circumstances. She has experienced male domination over female in her own house. She realizes how her father rules in every sphere from house to outside and how he refuses her mother's value in every matter. A feeling of humiliation overcomes on her mind and heart for male superiority. In a counter rebellion, she tries to belittle man in every possible way. To reject male superiority, Minx behaves like a free woman who can do each and every possible work. It is also a reason of lesbian relationship that a woman finds the skin of the woman partner soft and smooth, which is much more sexually gratifying as compared to the coarse and rough skin of the male partner. In such type of relationship a woman also feels free from any moral and social stigma usually attached to a man-woman sexual relationship.

Chick lit features interfering mothers who want to control their daughter's lives. In most chick lit novels mothers play their roles as if they are the personal secretaries to their daughters. ShobhaaDe's *Starry Nights*, has created such a mother figure, who controls everything that happens in her daughter's life. Compelled due to circumstances, she fails to play the role of a good mother. Familial relationships are considered backbone in a person's life. But when greed enters into the pure thread of relationships, it shatters and destroys the entire life of a person. In glamorous world hypocrisy is prevalent everywhere, whether professional or personal relationships. Woman is not given due importance and is considered a thing to be used and exploited. Though Geeta Devi, Aasha Rani's mother, wants to protect her daughter Viji or Aasha Rani from the dirty world of men but she fails to do so, because her husband deserts her. She has been left with three girls to bring up among the conditions of poverty, struggle and deprivation. This compels Geeta Devi to opt for the profession of prostitution. When she became aged she forced Aasha Rani to act in pornographic films. Her mother does not care about the feelings of her tender daughter. She takes her up to Mumbai and asks her to sleep with the producers of her films. In Mumbai, Aasha Rani becomes the first prey of Kishenbhai, who considers Aasha Rani his personal property as he says, "You are mine. Only mine, all mine" (6). Her mother and Kishenbhai send her to producers of her films. They send her to M. D. for the first time, who behaves savagely with her and after this experience she never bothered who is doing what to her. She says:

After that experience it was all the same. Most times she didn't even bother to look at the man's face or body. She just ceased to react. What difference did it make who he was and what it did? Kishenbhai sent her, Kishenbhai fetched her and in between she didn't know what was happening. (47)

The exploitation she has faced in her life by men arouse a voice and feeling of protest against men. She openly challenges men and their social system when she warns Kishenbhai, "I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all-beat you at your own game!" (13). When her mother feels that ShethAmirchand can fetch more films to her daughter she sends her to Shethji. How high ambition and greed for money and circumstances corrupt the purity of relationships, is truthfully depicted through the character of Amma. Aasha Rani once said:

All these relatives were just the same. Like amma. What do they care about the people who slave in the studios to make money for them? Nothing. But they want to control their lives all right. They want to tell them who to marry, who to sleep with, who to act with, who to be nice, who to ignore, who to snub. (27-28)

Her mother had always rebuked her and exploited her for the sake of money. She has completely destroyed her life. She has once told her husband Jay that, "All my life she has exploited me. I've known only harshness and punishment from her" (220). Her sister Sudha has also entered into the dirty film industry because of her mother. Sudha hates Aasha Rani and grabs all her property, jewellery and films. The lust for money and fame forced Amma to push Sudha Rani also into the filthy world. She forced Sudha Rani to sleep with Shethji in the same way as she has forced her elder sister. She offered her daughter Sudha to Shethji as:

I only want to present my younger daughter to you. I'd be honoured if you made a little time to see her. Yes, I know you are busy with the elections but try and squeeze us in, bahutmeharbani, Shethji. Sudha is young, and innocent—you will not be disappointed. (248)

When Sudha becomes popular, she turns selfish, hard-hearted and vicious. She has no feelings even for her mother. She is only after money, sex and fame. She gives malicious interview against her sister. Her mother also poisons her mind against Aasha Rani. Aasha Rani wonders, if they both are not her children or Amma really is such an unfeeling, ruthless woman. She thinks about the greediness of her mother that she is using one daughter against the other just for money. But she comes to the conclusion that behind the conflict between women or exploitation of a woman by another woman, there is always a man. The novel is a narration of events that subjugates women in one way or the other. Her Amma has turned into a greedy monster because her Appa has deserted

her mother with three daughters to bring up alone in desperate poverty and offered no monetary help.

Although Amma is very well aware of the dirty film industry yet she presses upon Aasha Rani to join it because she wants to protect her younger daughters who are 'pure' and she anticipates that "any good Iyenger boy will be proud to marry" (179) them some day and concludes that, "one child was enough" (179) to enter this dirty profession. That is why when Aasha Rani elopes with Abhijit and then gets married to Jamie Phillips, she said in an interview about her, "My daughter is a whore," "Aasha Rani betrayed me." "Mother disowns Aasha Rani," "Sweetheart of millions turns vamp" (247). "Aasha Rani in any case is dead to us" (248). She curses her that she "will never be happy" (247). But behind all these mishappenings in Aasha Rani's life are Appa, Kishenbhai, Akshay, Abhijit, ShethAmirchand and Amrishbhai. As it becomes apparent, when she bitterly remarks about Kishenbhai, which she makes after her unsuccessful suicide attempt, "I hate him for getting me into the industry; for ruining my life. I will never forgive him, never." (193)

It is a common theme in chick lit that husband indulging in some extra-marital affair and thus depicting the hypocrisy in husband wife relationship in upper crust of society. Shobhaa De in her novel has laid bare the fact that such hypocrisy becomes part and parcel of not only husband-wife relationship but also of man-woman relationship. There is no emotional bonding between husband and wife. They remain together for social status and to make appearances in socialite parties. Having a home-maker wife at home and many slim, beautiful, glamorous mistresses outside is a common tradition in Bollywood film industry in India. In the novel, the producer of Aasha Rani's first film, Kishenbhai, is a married man but he has extra-marital affair with Aasha Rani. Kishenbhai and his wife are in marriage because they want to maintain their social status. Another character Akshay, the leading star also does not have smooth relationship with his wife. His wife is aware of all the affairs of her husband, Akshay with the co-actresses. He has cleverly chosen his wife, who could manage his home and can produce lovely children to him. He neither wants to marry a glamour girl who will flirt with his friends nor an intellectual, who will question his individuality. Hypocrisy begins the very day they got married. When a reporter asked Malini about her husband's affairs, she replied in a political way, "I trust my husband. He will never do anything to hurt me" (67). Aasha Rani's Appa too, is a hypocritical person. He has a wife at home but keeps Aasha Rani's Amma as his mistress and deserts her one day in destitute poverty of this

selfish world alone. Jitendra Mehta, a film producer and his wife Neelam's married life is also not good. When Neelam comes to know that her husband is having sexual relationship with Aasha Rani, she sends hired ruffians to threaten her and stay away from her husband and the hired ruffians tear off her contract of the film. Aasha Rani is also leading a life of hypocrisy with her husband Jay. She married Jay hastily. She is faithful to Jay while in New Zealand but when she comes to India she maintains sexual relationship with Jitendra Mehta and Gopalakrishnan. Her husband also maintains an affair with his daughter's nanny, Alice. Through the lives of these characters Shobhaa De wants to show that sacred relationship of husband and wife is most hypocritical in the glamorous world. A middle class family uneducated couple may have mutual understanding, love and affection for each other but these so called high class people are living in utter superficial environment where everything is evaluated in terms of fame and money.

Money matters are of grave concern in the lives of typical chick lit protagonists. A typical chick lit heroine unites with a man, she may love him or not, but who is conventionally well appointed. Shobhaa De makes it clear in the *Starry Nights* that money plays an important role in the lives of Bollywood stars. In Bollywood film industry the success of a person depends upon showing the money power. Women of twenty first century are aware enough about their future security in terms of monetary means. Shobhaa De has very truly depicted the reality of the elite society of Mumbai especially people belonging to film industry. Aasha Rani was pushed into the dirty film industry by her devious mother. She gets tired of being a money machine. Money is not everything in Aasha Rani's life as with all glittering, fame and luxury, she craves for compassion and companionship. She being deprived of true loves tries to find it in Akshay's bosom. Her yearning for freedom from the world of bondage seems apparent when she says to her mother with anger, "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up of being your money machine. I've done enough for everybody—you, Sudha and the others—now, I want to live for myself and enjoy my life" (183-184). Like her Amma, Aasha Rani's younger sister Sudha is also greedy in the matter of money. She grabs all the jewellery and cash of Aasha Rani, when Aasha Rani went to New Zealand with Abhijit. The trick of earning quick money by glamorous women in film industry is revealed by the eunuch Mastaan of Shethji, who comments on Aasha Rani, "All you women are the same—screw a thousand men, get your womb filled by one of them and then come and *phasao* the richest one"(101). Sudha is so greedy after money that she had refused to give the share of money belonging to underworld don. Even when he phoned to warn

her she refused to pay the share and replied: "It's all my money. The film is mine, the idea is mine. I have acted in it, the credit goes to me, why should I part with more? I took the risk. I gambled. Now I'll decide what to do with the money I've earned" (382). Sudha is so mad after money that she stakes her life. Ultimately, the ruffians belonging to underworld don burned her amidst the highway and no one come to her rescue. She suffered sixty-per cent burns on her body. This incident conveys the message that greed of anything can prove harmful or can even take one's life. Sudha stands as an epitome of chick lit heroine who values money above all. In *Socialite Evenings* too, Shobhaa De has highlighted the importance, which modern women give to monetary considerations. Her female characters in this novel are highly obsessed with the desire for wealth, power, name and fame. They prefer to marry businessman rather than to government officials. The protagonist, Karuna in the novel is always self-conscious about her middle class origin. Karuna left her boyfriend Bunty only because he was an ordinary fellow with no bank-balance and married a wealthy businessman not out of love but to be the part of elite social class of Mumbai. Her remark on Anjali's affair with a government official, ignites her obsession for money: "What on earth are you doing with a salaried man, Anjali? You probably spend in one afternoon what the poor man takes three months to earn! You're right—he definitely isn't husband material—not for you" (109-110). Shobhaa De depicts, at the end of the novel, through the characters of Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* and Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* that though money is important to lead a good life but it is true love, which is more important. If we have countless money but not a single person who loves us or sit by our side in happiness and sorrows, then the money we had earned proves useless. For Shobhaa De, "Money was certainly one of the incentives but not the main one" (*Selective Memory* 403). She stresses on the word 'trust' instead of 'money' because, 'trust' strengthens and harmonizes the human relationships between individual and individual, family and family and one society to another.

Every chick lit novel centres around a love plot, although the nature of that plot varies according to its heroine's age and marital status. If the heroine is single and unattached, she will indulge in many relationships, only one of which will ultimately prove worthwhile. If the heroine begins the novel with an admirable boyfriend, she will place the relationship in risk by trying his patience and toying with a more glamorous man. If happily married, she will discover that her husband has been having an affair and will either patch things up with him after an interval of freedom or endure his departure and begin a new relationship. In ShobhaaDe's *Starry Nights*, the

protagonist, Aasha Rani, searches for true love in each and every relationship, but remains devoid of it throughout the novel. Everybody seems to exploit her in one way or the other. Love is an instinct which is common among all the creatures in the world. Everyone understands the language of love whether he is a human being or a beast. In the earlier times affection, care and respect were the main thread in familial relationships and friendship. But in the contemporary urban India especially in Mumbai, people have no time for others. Their life is so fast that everyone seems to be in the mad race of overlapping everyone in earning money. Life is so busy in metropolitan cities that parents have no time for their children. In family, Aasha Rani does not receive true love from her parents. Her father leaves them alone to struggle in this cruel world and her Amma in the desire to earn quick money first forces her to act in pornographic movies and then in Mumbai forces her to warm the bed of various film producers and politicians to get the role in their films. She remains destitute of true love and tries to find it in her illicit relationship with Akshay. But when Akshay discarded her, she went to New Zealand with Abhijit and when Abhijit's father brings him back to India and then she meets Jay (Jamie Phillips), who proposes to marry her and her acceptance results into their wedding. She gets love, care, tender feelings and respect from Jay, which she has never got from any Indian and she feels a new ray of hope in her life. The birth of her daughter Sasha lightens up her insecure world. When she returns to India after five years, she again joins the film industry. She realizes the security the marriage brings in her life. She expresses her gratefulness to Jay, her husband for rescuing her from complete disaster. She confesses, "Jay, ... in a way saved my life. ... I was sick of living. Sick of deception. ... how can I repay you for all that?" (288-289). Later in the novel, there arises a rift between Aasha and Jay because Jay entertains an affair with Sasha's Nanny in Aasha Rani's absence and he also deserts her but she has overcome her insecure feelings by now. She feels grateful to Jay who had helped her regain her confidence. Aasha Rani's remarks show that love gives confidence to a person and enlightens a hope to live life confidently and bravely by facing struggle in life. Similarly, in *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna and her friend Anjali try to find love in extramarital relationships, when they do not get the needed care, love and attention from their respective husbands. Anjali's husband, Abe maintains extra-marital relationships with every girl he meets and when it becomes unbearable for Anjali, she prefers to walk out of the marriage. Karuna too, breaks off her marriage because there was no dialogue or mutual-understanding with her husband and she indulged in extra-marital relationship. Chick lit heroines do not take time to walk out of a relationship, which is not endurable. In the same way

ShobhaaDe's heroines Aasha Rani and Karuna in both the novels, do not prolong their bad marriage and shake their wedlock off.

Literature is the image of the time and it depicts the socio-political and economic conditions of certain area in a certain context as Ruth Ribbons discusses it in *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide* (1999) that,

The text is produced out of a specific reality, and it bears the marks of its time, place, and mode of production. It is to be understood as relating to historic and geographic specificity, both at the moment at which it is first produced, and at the moments when it is reproduced by our reading of it. (50)

This novel too exposes us to the recent trends of the then sexual relationships of man and woman. It is nature's course that seeds once sown take time to sprout and grow in a full-fledged tree. The when time when Shobhaa De has wrote the novel *Starry Nights*, live-in, gay and lesbian relationships were rarely talked about, but today in contemporary metropolitan cities this trend has become a rule then an exception. The court has given its consent in the favour of homosexuals but earlier, such types of relationships were considered against the order of nature. In live-in-relationship a boy and a girl live with each other under one roof like a married couple. In urban India sophisticated women are now taking bold enough steps to live-in relationship. But in most of the cases this type of relationship is purely based on sex or bodily attraction. Most of the couples break their relationship within a short span of time. There seems no mutual understanding and emotional intimacy between the couples. Sudha Rani, in the novel, is living with Amar in live-in-relationship. They don't love each-other but they remain together just for the status. Sudha is free to have sex with anybody and Amar is equally free. He prefers young boys than girls. When Sudha was attacked by goons, he doesn't care about her. De wants to portray the spiritual draught which has taken place in our society. Every relationship seems to be based on money and sex and not on love, affection and mutual understanding. It is the exposition of hollowness of Indian urban life, family and society, particularly urban women. Shobhaa De here poses a very serious and pertinent question that makes us ponder over the course and the means we are following in our life. They compel us to think whether we are on the right track or not.

In our society man thinks that woman has been made for his sole use and for tolerating everything without any cry for her pain. She is expected not to affirm herself as an autonomous being, and not to articulate her true self. In this society a woman is confined to underestimate



herself. Our established social rules compel her to tolerate this unjust behaviour mutely. Society can't change women's condition because this is the society which belongs to man and where woman has to adjust herself or otherwise to struggle. The only way for the emancipation of woman is as Simone de Beauvoir (1983) writes:

Woman can be emancipated only when she can take part on a large social scale in production and is engaged in domestic work only to an insignificant degree. And this has become possible only in the big industry of modern times, which not only admits of female labour on a grand scale but even formally demands it. (86)

ShobhaaDe's works are a revolt against traditional patriarchal society and the social norms to underestimate woman. She intends to reconstruct the established social norms about woman. Here it seems that her writings are more or less feminist but this is half-truth. In her novels she has created an atmosphere in which a woman is not a victim of the social taboos but has the power to shatter all those boundaries and turns out victorious. In the novel Aasha Rani, a prey to her mother's desires, achieves freedom and becomes an independent being emotionally, mentally and financially. Earlier in her life, she was dependent on her mother, and later when she was a successful actress in the film industry, she depended emotionally, physically and mentally on AkshayArora. She became dependent on her husband after marriage, but when he maintains an affair with Sasha's Nanny, she takes divorce from him and resides in London for some time in her disillusionment. But lastly she gathers courage and finally decides to revive her father's studio. It becomes apparent that if a woman craves for freedom, she has to engage herself in some employment, only then she can come out from the subjugation of man and can affirm her status as subject. Shobhaa De believes that without education and economic self-sufficiency, true independence of women can't be achieved. A self-sufficient woman can defend herself against the domestic slavery in which she is bound and it is through economic self-sufficiency that she can make herself feel free from male domination.

The novelist seems to be of the opinion that a woman is subjugated by man as well as a woman. In this novel, it can be verified through conflicts between different women characters, though the root cause of the problem behind them is a man who drives a wedge and creates differences among them. In this way feminism challenges itself as well as male domination for women emancipation. Aasha Rani starts her aggression against patriarchy and Kishenbhai becomes her first prey, when he objects her affair with ShethAmirchand. It provokes her into a

fitting reply to him, instead of being apologetic for it. She replied him, “You financed and produced my first film, Kishenhbhai, but you extracted payment from my body. You call me prostitute, but you forget that you were my first pimp. So don’t throw *ahsanon* me. I owe you nothing! I owe you nothing” (21). The aggression she shows is the outcome of long suppressed sense of vengeance of the male world which has its roots in the ill-treatment of her Amma by her Appa, or it is owing to her own exploitation by the male world since her childhood. In her childhood her father left them in miserable condition. When she entered film industry she faced exploitation each day. Akshay also exploited her physically, emotionally and mentally in whose heart she tried to sense love and care. A woman is also an enemy of another woman. Conflict between Neelam and Aasha Rani took place due to Jitendra Mehta. Neelam sends three goons to threaten Aasha Rani of dire consequences if she doesn’t withdraw from the life of Jojo. Unable to control her husband, Neelam takes help of money power and tries to control the life of Aasha Rani. Similarly Malini is extremely possessive of her husband Akshay and therefore, she accuses and abuses Aasha Rani at Rita’s house for entrapping her husband. Another conflict in Aasha Rani’s life takes place due to an affair between her husband Jay and Sasha’s nanny, Alice. When she comes to know of the affair between Nanny and Jay, she rebukes her and asks her to leave the house at once. But Jay comes to her rescue and confesses that he is in love with that girl. Jay once admitted to Aasha Rani, “I didn’t marry you to ‘save’ you. I did it for myself. I find you impossibly sexy, and yes, exotic”(289). It shows that Aasha Rani was only an object of consumption to Jay. He married her only to satisfy his own ego. And lastly, it is Amar, the cine actor, who used to be the boyfriend of Aasha Rani but now he is living in relationship with her sister, Sudha. He is also a cause of conflict between the two sisters. The conflict Aasha Rani faces at every step, whether with Amma, Malini, Neelam, Nanny or Sudha, the prime source of the conflict lies in man. It is always a man who becomes the root cause of conflict in woman’s life.

Chick lit portrays such protagonists who remain highly obsessed with their bodily image and make themselves beautiful with constant monitoring of their body. Obsessional preoccupation with body can be easily traced in the lives of glamorous young urban women. In contemporary times women are very conscious about their beauty, looks and the clothes they wear. They make whole hearted efforts to keep themselves trendy. In film industry a sexy body is very essential to get success and popularity. Aasha Rani despite her dusky complexion has a very sexy body. While in Madraas, she was dark, fat and ugly girl. But when she comes to Mumbai, she makes herself

desperately beautiful with continuous surveillance and watching of her body. Her sister Sudha is also a beautiful girl. When Aasha Rani came to India after her five years stay in New Zealand, she just got stunned watching the striking posters of Sudha Rani on the hoardings. Once she can't believe her eyes that it is Sudha. Sudha's consciousness for beauty finds expression when she longs to die because hired ruffians have burnt her beautiful body and face. She wants to die because she is no more beautiful as she asks Aasha Rani, "Please... please, go away. I don't want to see me like this. I want to die. I don't want anyone to see me. There is nothing left to live for"(397). But Aasha Rani tenderly gives her strength and tells her that the fading of bodily beauty is not the end of everything in life. Shakespeare in sonnet XVIII voiced a similar idea as: "And every fair from fair sometimes declines,/By chance, or nature's changing course untrimm'd" (*Fifteen Poets* 95). Similarly the novelist here wants to depict that bodily beauty is short lived. One should not feel arrogant and proud of the beauty and should not hate those who are not physically beautiful. A person's real strength lies in his/her deeds. Aasha Rani's forgiving attitude towards her sister Sudha in the end is an expression of ShobhaaDe's faith in humanistic approach in life. The novelist's view that a woman is incomplete without conceiving a child, finds expression at different places. It can be traced in two comments, one by the protagonist and the other about her by another woman. The first comment she makes is by way of an introspection, when army men's women asks her that what about her family, husband and children. She advises her that she may not miss these things now but later, when your looks and popularity fade, then she will think that her life is so empty and these women are so lucky. Aasha Rani realizes that these women were right. But she consoles herself at least with the feeling that she has married and has a daughter. Here Aasha Rani slightly deviates from the path of being a chick lit heroine because they try to escape from giving birth to a child. In this regard Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* aptly fits herself into chick lit framework as she does not want to give birth to a child because she wants to retain her bodily image beautiful and sexy.

Glamour brings darkness and doom in the life of stars. Everyone in the glamour world seems in the mad race of making more money. Life is destitute of care and respect. Whatever seems outside is not the representation of inner truth and hypocrisy is rampant everywhere. The title of the novel, *Starry Nights*, is itself suggestive of the darkness, gloom and frustration in the lives of cine stars. The word 'night' connotes something bad, wicked, evil and corrupt. ShobhaaDe's *Starry Nights* sprinkles light on the darkness which has enveloped Aasha Rani, a film

actress. Her journey to stardom is most painful. She experiences emptiness at every step in her life. Aasha Rani was a lovely innocent child before entering this hypocritical industry. Her high ambitiousness, conniving mother has ruined all her life by bringing her into this dirty world of glamour. Her sister Sudha Rani becomes a leading actress but a conflict on share of money with the underworld don ruins her life. She was desperately gorgeous and admirable before the murderous attempt was made on her. Due to this incident she suffers sixty per cent burns on her body. It brings darkness in her life and she loses hope to live because she thinks that everyone will hate her due to her ugly face. Amma confesses to Aasha Rani in the end about the glamorous industry that, "It is vulgar, cheap, cruel—not meant for decent people"(152). Shobhaa De aptly expresses her belief about the otherwiseshining of the glamorous industry that whatever glitters is not the gold. Though the night is starry i.e. calm and placid yet it is night only and not a day.

There are certain other elements also which make *StarryNights* an apt chick lit novel. Chick lit is about the glamorous women of independent means. Aasha Rani's Amma has mentioned once that her father has left her alone to raise three daughters. But we do not find any mention of the third daughter again throughout the novel. Even when Aasha Rani, Sudha and her Amma were together in Madraas with Appa, she does not find mention anywhere. It shows that being a chick lit novel it gives importance to only those protagonists who are young, glamorous, famous and independent. Another instance of shallowness or the typical characteristic of chick lit in the novel is the change of name, which is indicative of the escape from the real. The real name of Aasha Rani is 'Viji' but she changes it on Kishenbhai's suggestion as it looks grand like 'Devika Rani.' It is only after her comeback to India after marriage that she comes to reality and realizes the importance of roots in one's life and in the *mahoorat* party organised by Ritaji at Madraas, she utters her original name when asked by the guard: "He turned to her and said 'Name Please' in broken English. She rolled her window down and said, 'VijiIyengar.' The security guard looked at her curiously and waved the car on. She was surprised at herself. Why hadn't she just said Aasha Rani?" (282). Being in their twenties and thirties chick lit heroines show an excessive liking for the pink colour. Aasha Rani too has an obsessional fondness for the pink colour. Aasha Rani's room was all pink as it is mentioned in the novel:

She stared at the room. The same revolting pink that her room in her Bandrabunglowboasted. Pink-wall-papered walls, pink silk bedcovers, pink lace-edged pillows. Pink, pink, pink. It was a pink nightmare, down to the pink basin

and pink bidet in her pink- tiled bathroom. Whatever had given everybody the idea that she liked pink? (124)

The protagonist, amidst all the sufferings which were inflicted upon her directly or indirectly by men and their society, gains victory and hope in her life. Akshay has exploited her mentally and sexually. But in the end, when Akshay was in critical condition, he met Aasha Rani and apologized to her. Aasha Rani's father is the second person who apologized to her in writing for his past errors. In his farewell letter to Aasha Rani, he begged for forgiveness and tried to explain circumstances in his life that had compelled him to take harsh and ugly decisions. He writes a letter to tell her, "How sorry I was for whatever had happened. I had done all of you great harm. Behaved unforgivably. Cruelly, your Amma's life—I destroyed it"(293). Her Amma also realizes her mistake and changes her behaviour towards Aasha Rani. She confesses to her, "I have realized my mistake. Now I'm no longer thinking of your career, I'm only thinking of you and your happiness"(260). The last person who asks for forgiveness is her own sister Sudha Rani. When Sudha was in the hospital on account of burns on her body, she seeks pardon from Aasha Rani. She apologized to Aasha Rani, "God has punished me. I deserve it. I have been evil. I have sinned. I have done so much harm. You don't have to forgive me. Take everything I have. It is rightfully yours, I grabbed it from you"(397). All these confessions bring a ray of hope in Aasha Rani's life and she again gathers strength to face the life bravely.

"Hope" is the keynote of the novel, which always helps the protagonist to overcome worst situations that she faces in her life. The name of the protagonist in the novel is Aasha Rani, which means hope itself. Aasha Rani's Amma struggles very hard to make her daughter a successful actress. When Aasha Rani elopes with Abhijit Mehra and finally in Wellington gets married to Jay, Amma turns her hopes to Sudha Rani. But when Aasha Rani returns to India after five years, her hopes once again gets rejuvenated. Aasha Rani's father has lost all the hopes and dreams after the tragic incident in the past at his own theatre. But when he sees Aasha Rani, all his hopes get reborn as he utters, "I can tell myself, all is not lost yet. You have a daughter. A clever daughter. She will revive your banner. She will reopen the studio. She will once again restore that lost glory of your name"(296). His father had lost will to live or even to speak but when Aasha Rani comes to him, he asks her daughter to reopen the studio. So the atmosphere of hope, struggling against a sense of gloom, is discernible here in the novel.

When Aasha Rani comes back from her foreign tour, she finds the worst situation in her life. Her sister Sudha has sustained severe burns all her body, including face. And her mother and father had grown very old and they were about to die. But she decides that she will not run again from the difficulties. She gathers her lost strength by recalling Akshay's words, "India is also beautiful. We can make it beautiful you and I"(388) and from Jay's comment, "I believe a person should not live with regrets. A frustrated person is an unhappy person"(290). She also gathers hope and strength from her Appa's farewell letter in which he outlines his master plan. The letter reads, "The studio was hers all along. Only the solicitors knew it, the name and the premises—they were both Aasha Rani's—the name that had given so many super-hits—the name that now belonged to Aasha Rani"(390-391). Aasha Rani promises her Appa to resurrect the family banner and reopen the studio and infuses hope in her Appa's life.

Aasha Rani's consoling words to her sister are also full of hope and she demands for mutual co-operation from Sudha. She asks Sudha, "First you have to promise me one thing—that you will stay with me. I will look after you and you are going to help me. The two of us together will reopen Appa's studio—our studio"(398). She also tries to give hope to her by saying that her face will be alright through plastic surgery. Here, the term plastic surgery signifies that women should overcome their inferiority complex and other weaknesses of the mind and heart. In the end the protagonist expresses her hope in her daughter Sasha. She prepares her mind to make Sasha, her daughter, "The Golden Girl of the silver screen"(401). Here, Shobhaa De also uses the symbol of *Dipawali's Diyas*. In Indian society *Diya* is symbolical for the son of the family. Sasha is '*Diya*' or a ray of hope of future for Aasha Rani and the novelist through the protagonist wishes to equalize the status of a girl and a boy in the society. Sasha is *Kuldeepika* for Aasha Rani. A critic Sandhayarani remarks:

In a twilight between dream and waking, Aasha Rani has a vision of her daughter's future. She dreams to fulfil her dreams through her daughter by making her a superstar. Sasha will live her own life on her own terms. Aasha Rani thinks of bringing up her daughter in different way than her Amma. With her daughter she will conquer the world without any heartbreak, any disappointment and compromise. (172)

The end of the novel is the most optimistic. The last lines of the novel are, "It was Diwali tomorrow. The festival of lights; she would need to tell Laxmi to prepare the *Diya's*"(401). Here the novelist suggests in the symbolic language that with the passage of time and spread of

education, women will certainly achieve equality with men. In coming future, there will not be a situation like: “*Waqt ne kiyakyahaseensitam, tum rhena tum, hum rhena hum*” (quoted in *Starry Nights* n. pag.) because sooner or later women will attain the glory they are capable of and they will achieve their due share of love, care, honour and respect in the family and society. Finally, the novel ends with an optimistic suggestion for women that let us not lose hope because it is a universal truth that, “Tine heart, tine all,”(Fergusson125) which means if you lose heart you will lose all.

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