

Sultry days by shobha de



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

SULTRY DAYS : A Tale of Struggle and Freedom Sultry Days is the fifth novel written by Shobha De published in the year 1994. With Sultry Days Shobha De has explored a different approach in her characters which had not been seen in her previous novels. Shobha writes in the front page of this novel; 'For my children... finally a book by me that they can read. ' L. Sonia Ningthoujam writes; 'Sultry Days, takes us into the world of power, sex and guns, the shady side of Mumbai upper class society. [1] In this novel Shobha has realistically presented the lives of youth, their aspirations their attitudes, she mentions in her autobiography; ' The novel is littered with types from that mixed-up decade-the self-styled bohemians out to change the world but not their smelly underwear; the dirty old men of Mumbai, all gas and small turds; the corporate ladies with their 'good life' hangs-ups; the intellectuals, pariahs and parasites who feed off the rich while spitting on their 'capitalist values'. It was a fun book to do.

And for those of us who grew up in that era in Mumbai, there were a lot of familiar echoes and reference points that provided loads of amusement during the recounting. I consider 'God' one of my better-etched characters... I can only regret he wasn't for real. ' [2] Shobha De dazzles the reader with her frank and candid tales of the lives of males and females who are trying to carve a successful career in the field of literature and journalism in the city of Mumbai. Because of her own journalistic stint in Mumbai Shobha's Sultry Days emerges as a very realistic novel.

Shobha says, 'I rather liked doing this book with its simple tale of doomed love, simply because it took me back to my college days and to the edges of the pseudo-arty intellectual world I flirted with briefly before beating a hasty

retreat. ' [3] The protagonist in this novel is also a female like other novels of Shobha De, but unlike her other novels Sultry Days also revolves around a male character. Nisha, the protagonist of the novel is a strong headed and career oriented female although the novel also deals very realistically with a male character who also becomes the central character as the novel unfolds.

God or Deb is the central male character and Nisha is the narrator. It is through Deb that Nisha discovers herself. Nisha is a young college student who is sharp and focused towards studies, she comes from an upper middle class family. Nisha's parents do not have a very loving relationship. She always feels tense that father has no time for her mother and neglects his daughter. Nisha is a shy girl and she always hated the frown birthmark on her forehead which made her look tensed all the time. ' Was it my expression? Did I look troubled? In pain? Depressed? Maybe it was that birthmark of mine.

It had to be that. I was born with worry lines between my brows. ' [4]-----
page 2 Nisha thought that she may appear to Deb as a, 'A prissy little good girl who carried far too many books around. Pretty enough, I suppose. But not special. ' [5]--- page 2 From the beginning we become aware of Nisha's attraction for Deb who is also referred to as God by most of his college friends. Deb is the son of a communist and is also a communist himself, he often gets arrested while taking out Mochas. Nisha gets attracted to Deb because of his unusual personality.

His appearance is shabby, wears days' old stubble, always scratches his 'matted locks which were full of lice-nests,' smokes 'beedies,' is a man of loose morals, 'has had several girls by the time he reached college'. His

attitude towards girls is also to - 'use them and leave them. ' ' I learnt very quickly that I had to bury whatever little ego and pride I had if I wished to hang around God. His attitude towards girls was simple-use them and leave them... As for me, I was plain moonstruck. And for once in my life I wasn't going to lose out by default. ' [6]--- page 5

Despite his shabby appearance, 'God's hands and fingernails were surprisingly, neat and clean. ' He knows many languages such as German, French and Spanish. He had already read Chaucer and Karl Marx before leaving school. Deb fails to tolerate exploitation and hence revolts against injustice, tyranny and frivolities. In the beginning of the novel Deb asserts the importance of decent means and told Nisha that he was not interested in money as it is only 'means to an end. ' Nisha is very impressed with his manners. Nisha is truly in love with Deb and tries hard to work their relationship.

Deb however, is not very emotionally attached to Nisha or at least he pretends so. He mainly lives off Nisha's money. Nisha tells; 'I loved buying things for God. It gave me a sense of belonging. Gifts were a bond-perhaps the only one. Gifts-which he took entirely for granted. ' [7]--- page 13 Nisha's parents disapproved of God as they felt that God is using their daughter for his own profit. But Nisha is totally smitten by Deb and tells them, 'I'd like Deb to ruin my life. I want him to ruin it. I don't care if he wrecks it. I love him. [8]----- page 14 Nisha is very possessive about her mother and when Deb passes some nasty comments on her mother, Nisha screams at him in a fit of anger, 'Oh, shut up! How dare you? ' I screamed, 'You and your filthy mind. What would you know about the needs of ladies-you who have no

background, no class, you filthy bastard. ' [9]- page 17 Nisha's father is a typical hypocrite husband. At home he had set rules for his wife and daughter to follow. He expected his wife to be dolled up in office parties according to his tastes. His wife had no choice.

Nisha tells, ' My father's ideas of a well-dressed wife were pretty fixed-she had to be draped in pastel-coloured chiffon worn with a sleeveless blouse... Make-up, especially lipstick, was of vital importance since he firmly believed it was a sign of sophistication and no stylish woman should ever be seen without it. ' [10]--- page 19 He expected his wife to look after the house and accompany him for occasional parties. She was never encouraged to do something worthwhile outside home. When Nisha's mother told her friends that she had no time for her personal interests her friend tells her; 'That is your problem.

But if I were in your place, I would just tell him that if he'd wanted to marry an ayah, he shouldn't have married you. We bring a lot of status to our husband and they should realize it. ' [11]----page 24 Nisha's father did not approve of women going out of home for work. When Nisha's mother got an offer for work from her friend Pratimaben her husband denied it straightaway by saying; 'In our company wives do not work.... They stay at home and organize dinner parties' [12]--- page 147 For a large number of years after their marriage Nisha's mother use to give up without a fight with her husband.

But when the artificial behavior of her husband started taking toll on her senses she told her husband in a fit of anger; 'I have had enough of yourbullyingand hypocrisy. I have kept quiet for far too long. Go to hell with

your corporate nonsense.... Why should you I? Why should I bother about you either? You can also go to hell with your pompous talk and empty boasts. I am sick, do you hear, sick of living this false life... Well-it's my turn now. And you can listen to me for a change. I will go along with Pratimaben with anything I choose to do. She is my friend.

She encourages me. She appreciates me... Whether you like it or not, henceforth I will make the decisions about my life. And the first thing is that I'm taking a job. ' [13]----- page 148 Shobha De satirizes the hypocritical couples who have extramarital relations and yet pretend to be faithful to each other. Deb broke the news to Nisha that her father is having an affair with a Sindhi woman. Even Nisha's mother confirms that her father has broken all ties with her. In spite of their differences Nisha's parents throw an anniversary party for their friends.

Nisha was tensed seeing all this and admits; 'As for me, I was drawn into my mother's sad world, full of self-pity and doubt. I didn't know what to make of the bomb she had dropped. My father continued to be 'normal' and pretended nothing had happened. ' [14]-----page 62 In this novel Shobha De throws light on the hollow life of film and modeling world. Deb gets no pocket money from his father, he does free lance reporting as well as proof-reading. After college Nisha joined an ad agency and she became a little busy in her life. Whenever she had time she met God and enjoyed his company.

As God became conscious of his creative powers, he started writing poems. Nisha felt delighted seeing God moving in the league of contemporary poets. God is also very proud of his poetic sensibilities. God started attending workshops in which amateur poets gathered and showcased their work.

Shobha De gives a very realistic picture of this strata of upcoming talent. She refers to such workshops as; 'The sessions were conducted in dingy halls where the organizers didn't have to pay any rent. Everybody sat around on uncomfortable folding chairs or on the floor...

Others who were present regularly were a fairly motley lot of struggling writers, a Grande Dame of Verse, frustrated copy-writers and self-styled critics. '[15] - page 26 Nisha never felt at ease in the meetings of Anglo Indian Poets Association. There were some aspiring women members also in the group. Women like Chandni, Sujata, Pramila etc wanted to get name and fame in the field of journalism. These women wanted to get away from the clutches of domesticity and wanted to breathe in the fresh air. One such character is that of Sujata. Sujata was also a member of God'spoetryrecitation group.

She represents modern women who fulfill all her homely duties and also doesn't forget her own interests. Shobha writes; 'All of them-her timid husband and four daughters, doted on her. However, she had made it plain that she had gone beyond them and that she'd stopped playing wife and mother long ago. ' After fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother, Sujata decided to live her life on her own terms. She told her family ; ' My duties are over. They are on their own now,' she would explain. 'I have played the roles I was expected to at the appropriate times. Now...

I'm on my own. And they are on their own. This is my life. I want to live it my way. ' [16]---- Page 31 God appreciated Sujata's behaviour, he tells Nisha; 'What's wrong with her behaviour? She is beautiful, man, just beautiful. She follows her instincts. She makes her own rules. She's not a coward. She cares

two hoots for the so-called “ society”. I admire her guts, yaar. ' [17]---page 31 Ultimately, God joined Plume magazine as sub-editor and felt delighted. The basic aim of Plume was to encourage young poets.

Shobha de has very realistically portrayed women's protest against the prevalent system which limits the scope of a woman's life to mere day to day household chores. In this novel women like Sujata and Pratimaben do not accept their traditional roles in marriage. They detest being limited to the domestic chores. Extremely conscious of their changed role in family, they proclaim loudly, 'We are not only housekeepers after all, 'We are not mere housekeepers, after all. ' [18]---page 24 Some women are career conscious to the extent that they do not think in terms of a settled family.

Manju, Vimla are the professionals in marketing field and are career oriented females. They represent the 'new age' females writes Shobha De; ' These were the no-nonsense women who had 'take me seriously' written all over them..... They took their jobs with an earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity. Even the married ones insisted on being addressed as 'Ms' or stuck to their maiden names. Their male colleagues were not permitted to crack jokes or flirt lightly.' She writes further, “ Workaholism for women had become very fashionable. If men can pursue careers ruthlessly, so can we, women declared at seminars and workshops for senior managers..... ' Postpone babies or ask your husband to share house work. ” [19]----- page 119 These characters in Sultry Days have an altogether different outlook towards family and social life. In this context, De's feminist concerns in her fiction come close to the ideas expressed by Veena Noble Dass,

'Literature should show women in activities that are not traditionally 'feminine' to speed the dissolution of rigid sex roles.

It is not enough, however to simply place a female character in a new occupation, with no corresponding change in her personality and behaviour. '

[20] The modern woman aspire to exercise power and control the situation.

Feroze and Kiki also fall in the category of the New Woman of the new era.

Regarding Feroze Shobha De remarks; 'Feroze was on her own in more ways than one. Enterprising manipulative and full of strange kind of charm, she got around to places most people only dreamt of...

Feroze became a familiar and popular figure in filmdom in an incredibly short period... She drove her own car-she smoked foreign cigarettes. She traveled

by planes. ' [21]-----page 150 Nisha met Anil Bhandari, a young marketing guy who'd just set up a hot-shop of his own after coming back from a long stint in America with one of the best marketing agencies. Anil was in his early thirties and mockingly referred to himself as a 'first generation yuppie'.

[22] ---page 76 He was a fine example of a modern educated young man with refined international tastes.

He smelt of Aramis Drakkar and used Studio Line gel in his hair, wore Warren Beatty glasses. Soon Anil was going around with a supermodel model Shona. Shona and Anil perfectly complemented each other. Once they were engaged Anil emerged as a typical male from a hypocrite society. He told Nisha; ' In fact, I'm going to ask Shona to give up modelling once we're married. She won't need the money anyway. ' Nisha asked him; 'Maybe there's more than money in it for her. Maybe she loves her career. She is right at the top now. Have you discussed it with her? ' 'Not yet. I'm sure she'll

agree. She's such an innocent docile girl. ' Anil said. What will she do with her time? ' Nisha asked him. Anil replied and asked Nisha; 'What does any housewife do? There's so much to do around the house. ' [23] --- page 109

As the novel progresses we see visible change in God's attitude. From a small time poem writer and proofreader Deb starts working for an art magazine Plume. Having tasted power and money during his association with Plume, God's sole interest is to acquire money and power. Although Nisha does not approve of God's new way of life. She explains her utter repulsiveness to God's new style of living which had begun sowing the seeds of discord and estrangement between them.

She says; 'No I didn't like what was happening to God at all. We were beginning to see less and less of each other now that he didn't need to touch me for cash that often... God was behaving like a mortal, like all the other journalists in the town, a bum who shamelessly sold his pieces for a fews pegs of scotch and a five-star evening' [24] - page 100 Nisha always looked for a loyal partner in Deb which Deb ceased to be, not because of his alliance with other women but because of their varied interests. Deb and Nisha's relationship turned cold after the former starts caring less and less for his self-respect.

He turned out to be a typical man from a male dominated society. Deb has moved to his own place and required somebody to cook for him and look after his house. Nisha suggested him to get a maid. Deb very casually told her; 'These maids-shaids are a hassle, yaar. I need my own woman. If you want, I don't mind a shaadi-waadi-I know that will make you feel better. Theek hai-we can be burgeois and go through with that marriage rubbish.

You can cook, can't you?... Can you fry puris without burning your fingers? Can you make rice that isn't sticky?... Better to get all this straight from the start, hai na?

No lafda later on... Give me my daal-roti, a warm bed, twice-a-week maalish and a daily screw. That's all I expect. ' Nisha was too stunned to respond to what she heard; 'One part of me was laughing. The other, feeling sorry for this man. He was obviously deranged-or the world's biggest egotist. He actually expected me to jump at this offer. He looked so comic. So vulnerable, standing in the lobby, trying to look nonchalant and heroic. ' [25]---- page 160 God's sole interest in life was reduced to acquire money and power. Contrary to his attitude Nisha wants everything in life through sheer labor.

Nisha had never expected this change in God and she failed to convince him as to he did not need to work for a political broker, he needed to trust the power of his pen, but all her efforts went in vain. As ill luck would have it, Deb became proud of his power and joins Yashwantbhai, a don. God's new life style began to sow seeds of discord and estrangement between them. Nisha realizes that God was no longer the same person she had fallen in love with. Nisha tried her best to refrain Deb from associating with a criminal like Yashwantbhai but Deb had gone too far to come back.

Nisha started exposing Yashwantbhai and his underworld connections in her write-ups. Nisha's bold action is supported by her mother and also by a social activist Pratimaben who unravels and brings to public notice Yashwantbahi's atrocities on his former mistress, Pramila. Pramila is a fine example of a new age woman. Pramila is a Nagpur woman, her husband is in a well paid job,

they have three children. Pramila is a talented poetry writer and to pursue her career in writing she leaves her family and moves to Mumbai. She shoots to fame as soon as her poems are published in English.

She administers a shock to her husband when she divorces him and leaves the house along with her two daughters. She eventually meets Yashwantbhai and becomes her mistress. She becomes a victim of his lust. She becomes pregnant with his child, Yashwantbhai forces her to get a sex check done for the unborn baby as he did not want a girl child. Knowing that the child is a girl Yashwantbhai abuses her and then it is God who helps her in going underground. Nisha, her mother, Pratimaben with Pramila's help expose Yashwant bhai.

Ultimately, Deb has to pay for his association with Yashwant bhai, he is shot by Yashwantbhai's goons and God collapses after struggling for a couple of days in hospital. When Dev is shot and admitted in the hospital, Nisha analyzes the life of ignorant and uneducated women of Bombay who never think of higher issues of life such as- What are the fundamental rights of a citizen? What is the interpretation of women liberation movement? What is secularism? Will women be free from the drudgery of the kitchen? What is the meaning of democratic socialism? Is socialism going to help women in any way?

What is the importance of L. I. C in the life of a family? Nisha thinks very realistically that these ignorant and simple-hearted women are not shot dead as they don't raise their voice against the underworld Dons. No threats are given to them as they don't interfere with the working of politicians. But the women in Shobha De's novels are strong and confident. These women know

what they want from life and how to achieve it. Nisha's mother followed her husband's instructions through out her life but finally she raised her voice against his hypocrite nature and emerged a winner.

Women in Sultry Days assert their free and autonomous existence, they struggle and fight against the established social order that threatens their existence. Bhaskar A Shukla observes; 'It may be partly on account of her experience as a journalist that she is able to tell things interestingly and with a courage of conviction in a language uniquely her own. ' [26] Women in Sultry Days represent a modern, self-sufficient and financial independent woman. These women do not expect their male partners to provide them financial security.

In fact, it is Nisha grants monetary favors to her boyfriend Deb for a long time. Sujata, Pramila, Pratimaben are women who do not wish to be enclosed in their homes, they wish to be free from the clutches of male dominated society. They show the courage to leave their houses and pursue their dreams and make a mark of their own. Binod Mishra remarks; 'In De's novels women's desperate struggle for existence unfolds in their unconventional behaviour, their sexual escapades and their dream for a life free from male domination. ' [27] BIBLIOGRAPHY Sonia Ningthoujam, Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De. 2Shobha De, Selective Memory: Stories From My Life, page 336 3Shobha De, Selective Memory: Stories From My Life, page 336 4Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 2 5Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 2 6Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 5 7Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 13 8Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 14 9Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 17 10Shobha De, Sultry Days, page 19 11Shobha De, Sultry Days, page

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