

Quest for Identity in Shobha De's Strange Obsession

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Abstract

The present paper aims to investigate the significance of identity in one's life, with special reference to Shobha De's "Strange Obsession", which is the story of two Indian girls Amrita and Minx who are victimized as silent sufferers in the male dominated Indian society. Countries like India where the patriarchal system has been practiced for a long time, have imposed so many restrictions and hurdles to bar the way of women. Here, women always remain unidentified and unnoticed before the presence of male partner. Patriarchal system is a world of double standards, where principles and ideals are used as mask to conceal the worst kind of social injustice, where cruelty and barbaric behavior are used as tools on women. Against this patriarchal system, sometimes women came out and opted for different ways, they challenged the society by rejecting its norms and values and went to extremes by selecting lesbianism. They challenged patriarchy by accepting lesbianism to liberate herself from the grip of the male hegemony. This article makes a serious attempt to study the challenges and struggles faced by Amrita and Minx while making their identity in the male dominated society.

Key Words: Patriarchal system, Lesbianism, Male hegemony, Homosexual.

Introduction

Strange Obsession is the fourth major work of Shobha De, published in the year 1992. De mocks on the cosmopolitan society and women which marks her ironical attitude towards serious issues. *Strange Obsession* again set in the backdrop of Bombay and tries to reveal the problems and sufferings of metropolitan citizens. Novel depicts the lives of two women Amrita Aggarwal and Meenakshi (Minx) Iyengar, who struggle to make their identity in the male dominated society, but in contrary and different ways. Amrita is struggling to make her identity in the field of modelling whereas Minx is struggling to create her identity as a lesbian, which is not accepted yet in Indian society.

In the beginning of the novel, Amrita appears as a young, beautiful girl looking for her career in the field of modelling. She

came Mumbai with lots of dreams and aspirations but at the end of the novel we find that her entire world has been changed due to the involvement of Minx in her life. Contrary to this Minx, who wants to establish lesbian relationship in her life, failed to achieve success because of the Amrita's indifferent nature and her refusal towards this relationship. At the end of the novel all her hopes are shattered and like her hopes her life comes to an end. In this way their world has been changed but completely in a different way.

It is interesting to note that in this novel there are more women than men, most of the men are shadowy, while women are sharply portrayed and occupy the centre stage. Amrita, Minx, Partha, Karan and Rakesh keep in motion the story of the novel. The novel centers around the events

that occur in the life of *Amrita*. The author highlights the conditions of the desolation and emptiness in her life. It is also ironic to see *Minx* using *Amrita* for personal gains rather than supporting her to build her career in the field of modelling.

Strange obsession unfolds the story of *Amrita*, who is young and beautiful girl from Delhi. She comes to Bombay to pursue her career in modelling. Later on she succeeded to get the new status of supermodel undergoing lesbian relationship with *Minx*. Though, *Amrita* does not like to undergo lesbian relationship with *Minx* but she was dragged forcefully by her. Women may escape sexual assaults of men but not women's advances in the name of lesbianism. When *Minx* spots *Amrita* for the first time she compliments *Amrita* by saying that-

You are gorgeous... you know that? Of course you do. Everybody must be telling you so (pg.8).

Amrita is blushed though she had been receiving such compliments, all her life but all were from men, no women had passed remarks like the way *Minx* just had. And this is the fact no previous compliment had affected her in the same manner.

Next morning *Amrita* was woken up by a sharp knock on her bedroom door. Her landlady *Mrs Pinto* informed her that the courier boy delivers a bouquet for her. *Amrita* pulled out the expensive letter paper from the bouquet with the short message, "To your eyes" (pg.10). *Amrita* had already guessed who had sent it, and dragged the arrangement into the drawing room as it was too big for her tiny bed-sitter room. Finally, *Amrita* got a jewelry campaign for a new client and she had to report for this

shoot at ten sharp. When she walked into the studio she found that *Karan*, the man behind the lens, was the person who shot the most talked about ads in the business. *Karan* refused to acknowledge her more than perfunctorily, his face was impassive, almost scary. *Amrita* withdrew into herself and thought about Delhi, then realized how cold Bombay people were by comparison. Just then she was informed by an artist that there was a call for her. *Amrita* was astonished to get the phone call from *Minx*. Her voice came through sounding frighteningly close.

'Startled you, sweetheart? Sorry. Didn't mean to. Just called to check whether you'd got the flowers.' *Amrita*, flushed and uneasy, didn't know what to say after a weak 'thank you'. *Minx* took care of that for her. 'I know it's going to be a long and tedious shoot today. You'll look fabulous in emeralds. But don't let Freddie go overboard with the eyes make-up. You don't need it' (pg.12).

Amrita was annoyed by this call, she had known *Minx* for only a few hours, and in that short period, she got the feeling that it was probably wise not to look deep into her new 'friend's' affair. *Amrita* started to work hard for her modelling assignments. Under the instructions of *Karan*, *Amrita* was working hard and hoped that the pictures of her shoot would take her to the top. Yet, there is a long way to go. *Karan* was meticulous, demanding and impatient. *Amrita* decided not to speak to him throughout the whole photo shoot session. Finally, she settled her mind not to make many friends during the pursuit of her career, and tried to make her world limited so that she can concentrate on her campaigns. She hoped that just one super

campaign would change her life forever and that was not far away.

Later, *Amrita* was followed by *Minx*. *Minx* followed her like a shadow. She even came to *Amrita's* house during her absence. Slightly *Amrita* was scared, and wanted to bring her strange behaviour to the notice of her parents, but she failed to inform them about it. Soon *Minx's* behaviour started to create an effect of awe into the mind of *Amrita*. Due to her unreasonable behaviour *Amrita* was so disappointed that she cancelled her shoot with *Karan* the next morning and decided to stay at home. For that, she was bitterly received threats from *Karan*. He reprimanded her by saying,

"Listen to me and Listen well! If you want to make it as a model, you'd better get your act together. Nobody is going to sit around waiting for you to show up. Girls like you arrive by the trainload every day. Nobody even looks at them. They come. They starve. And they go back. Get it?" (pg.19)

From *Karan*, *Amrita* learned about the past history of *Minx*. *Karan* told her how a past model from Chandigarh was badly used by *Minx*. Later the girl was missing and was not found till date. It is said that *Minx* was involved in missing but no report was lodged against her as she is the daughter of Inspector General, V.S. Iyengar and has influence in the police department after that when *Amrita* was offered friendship from *Minx*, *Amrita* readily refused the proposal by saying that she was weird and abnormal and she knew girls like her at school, to which *Minx* replies,

'Abnormal? What are you talking about? You think I'm a bloody lesbian,

don't you? Well, guess what? You are wrong. And so are all of them who've been telling you that. I'm not a dyke. I'm not kinky. And I'm certainly not crazy. Don't ask me to explain it to you- but I'm in love with you. I love you. I adore you. It is not sexual. I don't wish to go to bed with you. All I want is to be around you. That's all' (pg.26).

Amrita becomes furious and cries loudly at her to get out of her life. But *Minx* forces her to have her in her life and gives her signs that she is not one who gives up easily and warns her that *Amrita* should accept her presence in her life. *Minx* told her-

'You see, *Amrita*, you have become a part of me. You live right here in my body. I can feel your presence inside me all the time. Today it's a helpless, dumb animal's heart in your fridge. Who knows, tomorrow it could be mine. Don't play with my life, *Amrita*. You'll regret it' (pg.26).

It is a strange situation for *Amrita* that she is trapped in an unnatural relationship with *Minx*.

Meenakshi's troubled and neglected childhood fills her overbearing personality with hostility which turns *Amrita's* life nightmarish. To cope with anxiety and insecurity which is the result of her isolated childhood and abuse by her own father, *Minx* takes to exploiting people. Dominating others becomes a permanent fixture in her nature. This finds expression in her treatment of *Amrita* over whose life she obtained total control forcing her into submission. Every time *Minx* finds *Amrita* helpless before her, she experiences a pleasure which compensates for her own anxiety. *Minx* herself admitted that her abnormal behaviour (strange obsession) is the result of her neglected childhood,

uncaring mother and tyrant father. In the novel we find *Minx* as a neurotic person, the only and spoiled child of Inspector General of police, V.S. Iyengar. She had a lousy childhood as a result of a father's transfers and her mother's social work. She told her doleful tale as,

It's the same old rubbish... only child, lonely child, boarding. Schools... *Minx* trailed off. 'I was thrown out of the two schools... expelled. My mother was so ashamed. She didn't know how to face her friends in the Bridge Club, my father handled me the only way he knew. By belting me. *Minx* pushed up the sleeves of her shirt to show an old scar to *Amrita*, 'see this? The belt buckle got me here. He stopped only after he saw the blood'(pg.48).

Somehow *Amrita* wanted to continue her modelling career despite she had been caught with *Minx* in lesbian relationship. She was working hard in her modelling career as well as in her personal life. When things were out from her hands, she took right decision at right time, to go back to her home in Delhi and wanted to inform her family about her changed world. But this could not be happened as she was not so fortunate and favoured by destiny. Before she revealed the truth to her family, *Minx* arrived there and cast her magical spell over her family. Her arrival to Delhi shocked *Amrita* that *Minx* is such an eccentric woman who can go to any extent to love her. All her hopes and aspirations were shattered, as she knew it very well that there is no escape from her. Despite her wishes, *Amrita* surrendered herself before the claims of *Minx*. But *Amrita* was not very happy with these changes that were taking place in her life because the changes that were taking place in her life were contrary

to her wishes. It was very painful for *Amrita* that after reaching the top position of her modelling career, she had to come back from where she had started, all because of *Minx*.

Minx tried to justify her obsession towards her as her love. She says that there is nothing abnormal about her feelings for her. If there is any; it is because of personal hang-ups with other men. But it is not easy for *Amrita* to accept her claims, *Amrita* stared at her disbelievingly and said,

'Please, *Minx*, 'She pleaded. 'I can't handle any more of this. Why can't you understand that I have a life of my own... friends of my own... a family of my own? I have a right to all that you cannot force me to accept you... or your so-called love'(pg.49).

Amrita desperately tries to get away as far as she could from *Minx* but *Minx* tries all possible ways to develop a closer relationship with her by using implied threats in order to tighten her web around her. *Minx* discloses other bitter fact of her life to *Amrita* and tries to blame her father for everything. She said,

Listen... my father... yes... the same man who is so powerful, so respected, so feared is a beast. A beast of the worst kind. He... he... raped me'. 'Yes... that's what he did to me. I was thirteen years old. Just thirteen. Can you imagine what it must have been like'? (pg.50)

Minx's revelation is a kind of defensive reaction by means of which others are seen as responsible for one's own misdeeds and abnormal impulses. *Minx's* abnormal behaviour can be attributed to the lack of parental guidance during her childhood. She grows up as a neglected and

spoiled child. Thus, she lives in her own world of fantasy.

Amrita has to undergo many emotional disturbances because of *Minx*. She starts responding to *Minx*'s homosexual advances which put her in state of emotional crisis, whether she will be able to live a satisfactory married life with *Rakesh*. Though *Minx* tries her best to erase every possibility of a man in her life. *Amrita* finds it suitable to marry *Rakesh Bhatia*, as it is the only way to get rid of *Minx*. She is happy with the prospect of marriage and her union with a male partner. She considers it as an opportunity, an instrument for her escape and freedom from the bondage of *Minx*'s oppression and injustice. Though she was not very hopeful for the success of her married life because of her past involvements with *Minx*. At times lesbian relationship questions the existing husband-wife relationship, which leads to disturbance and chaos in the normal norms of married affairs. Priya Wanjari in her article, '*De -Analysis of Marital Relationships*' advocates that,

In 'Strange Obsession', husband - wife relationship is disturbed by the destructive obsession of *Amrita* with *Minx*. By marrying *Rakesh*, *Amrita* desires to escape from the clutches of *Minx*. At the same time, she creates a heap of doubts whether she would be suitable and fulfill the desires of her husband. The unethical sexual relations with *Minx* caused unwarranted effects on *Amrita*'s mind. (Contemporary Fiction: An Anthology of female writers, pg.197).

The final disintegration of *Minx*'s personality is caused by a violent increase in her anxiety levels as *Rakesh* seems a perpetual source of threat to her, At any cost

she wanted to keep *Amrita*, as a source of pleasure and excitement in her life and for that she tormented, *Rakesh* whom she considered as a hurdle in her way of pleasure full life. Lastly as novel unfolds we come to know that *Minx* was completely obsessed for *Amrita* and can't sustain her life in her (*Amrita*) absence. While *Amrita* is preparing for her marriage with *Rakesh*, at the same time *Minx* was preparing to remove *Rakesh* from the life of *Amrita*. Both are preparing for future but in a different way. The novel flashes light on the pathological mental stress of *Minx* at one hand and on the other hand it describes the pathetic condition of *Amrita*, being trapped by *Minx* in Lesbianism.

It is an escape from the male dominated society in order to seek desired identity and establish themselves as an icon in the society. Both female characters have tried to achieve their own identity in the society but in a complete contrary way. *Minx* searches for her identity as a lesbian, though it is not easily accepted herein Indian society but has tried her best to achieve it throughout her whole life. She shows her quest for lesbian identity whereas *Amrita* struggles for her identity as a super model in the field of modelling. She achieved success to some extent by becoming a famous model. But unfortunately in the whole process she was badly misused by *Minx*. Forcefully *Minx* pulled her into lesbian relationship by giving her so many threats. Later on, *Amrita* escapes from the grip of *Minx* after getting *Rakesh* as a loving one in her life and *Minx* is all alone again.

In this way, both *Amrita* and *Minx* have searched for their own identity in the society. It is only the liberation that gives

relief for women, when they are victims to the societal disorder. *Amrita* and *Minx*, extend their efforts to fulfill their quest for identity and achieve it at some point but later they split from each other as they have different goals which leads them to different directions. At the end of the novel, where *Amrita* enjoyed the bliss of marriage with *Rakesh*, *Minx's* unusual behaviour drags her towards the end of her life.

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