

# Kaumodaki : Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

[ A Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal; Indexed in NepJOL ]

ISSN : 2822 - 1567 (Print); ISSN : 2822 -1583 (Online)

Published by Research Committee, Vinduwasini Sanskrit Vidyapeeth (Campus)

Nepal Sanskrit University, Pokhara, Nepal

<https://ejournal.vsc.edu.np>

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## Femaleness in Shobha De's *Sisters*

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**Article History :** Submitted 25 Sept. 2021; Reviewed 22 Oct. 2021; Revised 01 Nov. 2021

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**DOI :** <https://doi.org/10.3126/kdk.v2i1.42878>

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### Abstract

The objective of this article is to explore the female voice in Shobha De's novel *Sisters*. The main female characters Mikki and Alisha discard the gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal society. In course of their struggle against the subjugation, they realize that the attributes of femininity are simply the trappings of male chauvinism. They speak that the be-all and end-all of a female is to realize the biological aspect of femaleness. Their dialogues and actions clarify that they want to disseminate the doctrines that sex and gender differ from each other. Sex is natural and biological while the gender is constructed by social and cultural patterns. The novel exposes this dichotomy between nature and nurture. Mikki readily leaves her home and rebels against the domination of her husband and determines to hear the inner voice of female. Alisha, on the other hand, believes that one can gain power by controlling the economic status. They both unite to come out of cesspool of patriarchal hegemony. In this regard, they become the revolutionary angels for the women. They become new women. The article exploits the paradigm of qualitative approach by using the perspective of feminism to explore all these dynamics of femininity and femaleness in the novel. It provides the points of departure between the femininity and femaleness by analyzing the issues in the novel.

**Keywords:** Cesspool, femaleness, femininity, patriarchal hegemony, subjugation

### Introduction

This article intends to interpret Shobha De's novel *Sisters* with the perspective of the quest of female identity in the patriarchal society. The pursuit gives the birth to new females. These new females are Mikki (Mallika) and Alisha, the daughters of the businessman named Seth Hiralal. These women rebel to break the confinement laid down by Indian patriarchal society. They become new women because they revolt against inequality and subjugation prevailed on the basis of gender. They give their maximum to subvert the constructed discrimination. They even use their bodies as the source of power to uplift the condition. The women establish themselves as the new angels for women rights when they emerge out of the cesspool. They break the wall of differen-

tiation between sex and gender. They plead that sex is biological and natural while the gender is simply the result of patriarchal social pattern. Sex is related to nature while gender is related to the nurture. The pursuit of Mikki and Alisha clarify this dichotomy when they prioritize nature for nurture. Their journey from femininity to femaleness proves that they speak the voice of new women.

The urban life in the novel graphically exposes the plight of women. It shows facts about woman who are dominated because they confine themselves within male standards. The novel focuses on the marginalization of women in the Indian society. They are treated as substandard human beings.

### Review of Literature

The novel has been capturing the attention of critics after it was published in 1992 AD. It has always commanded admiration, felicitations and criticism as well. Many critics have analyzed and interpreted the novel from different perspectives. Sonia Ningthoujam highlights the revolt of women in the novel. She says, "Life according to these women is to be lived as they desire" (36). They discard the domination of males. So, "they demand equality with them" (Ningthoujam 36). Mikki desires to win her sister Alisha. But, Alisha desires to be a rich lady. They depend on men for support. In order to search equality, they play with boyfriends and husbands. This exhibits their journey from femaleness to femininity.

De presents a complex development of a new woman who bears physical freedom and female qualities when she assimilates pleasure, career, and marriage. Satyanarayana views that the novel exposes the psychic conflict of the protagonist between the self and society. The novel, in this way, reflects the seamy part of business life along with the inner conflict of the protagonist (211). De delves deep into the psyche and heart of liberated upper class women.

Binny Malhotra, one of the main characters of this novel, forces his wife Mikki to quit the office. He imposes her to be just a house wife. About his confinement, Murali Manohar writes, "In fact, he pretends that he is interested in her, but his main aim is to seize all her property and make her dependent on him and does whatever he asks her to do" (146-147). This also reveals the patriarchal hegemony that changes a woman into feminine.

Mikki speaks the voice of a new woman created by De. She believes that women have to search their identity in the society. Sarbani Sen says, "Shobha De is producing a desi version of an American best-seller where the Indian ambience is merely an eroticizing on an unmistakably American cake" (200). Mikki, the new angel, bears the potentiality to break the confinement. In this regard, the novel is in Indian name while bearing American vibes in setting. The females rebel against male chauvinism. They never surrender. They assert their actions no matter they are constrained by their counterparts. Gupta views that the new women in the novel revolt to gain identity. The novel underestimates the existing gender relationship being skeptic about it. Besides, it also formulates its own concepts regarding the power and authority (4). The author has instigated the spirit of new women so that they could realize their spirit to face any bondage.

De depicts the totality of struggles in fulfilling the aspirations of women. She exposes the pursuit of femaleness. These echoes also presuppose the idea for the search of female identity that resounds in the novel. However, it is a matter of fact that there has not been a systematic reading of femaleness in the novel.

Mikki and Alisha break the patriarchal limitations and hegemony loaded with the spirit of subverting the traditional hierarchical social system. This article centers round their actions and

voices that lead to the identification of femaleness. To reveal this search, this paper answers the following questions:

- a. What make Mikki and Alisha the new women for the quest femaleness?
- b. Why do they epitomize the rebel against established patriarchal system?
- c. How do their struggles expose the agenda of femaleness from femininity?

### Methodology

This article exploits the qualitative approach to research. Creswell views that this approach explores the meaning and perceptions related to human problems. It provides the new interpretations to the concepts (data). Besides, it is flexible (4). The article provides a new look, providing the new interpretations for the issue of femininity and femaleness. It explores these issues of women by implementing the theory of feminism related to femininity and femaleness. Shobha De's novel *Sisters* has been considered for the source of primary concepts. Related criticisms, commentaries, and book reviews have been considered as the secondary sources to justify the claim of this paper.

### Feminism, Femininity, and Femaleness

The words like "feminist" and "feminism" reflect the social and political movement. They have remained as the catchphrases for the movement of 1960s that projected the concept of the new women. It is also a social movement that instigates to go beyond the patriarchal dominance along with the sexism that is prevailing in the society. Feminist critics reveal the gender biasness over the females. Nagarajan rightly clarifies these issues as he says, "Feminist literary criticism aims to study the ways in which cultural representations, like literature, undermine and reinforce the economic, social, political, and psychological suppression and oppression of women in society" (206). Therefore, feminism is a movement of liberation. The women seek freedom from the domination of the power users because according to Millet the concept of power becomes the encompassing ideology of our culture (cited in Moi 205). The concept of power always creates two groups. The dimension of power relation in feminism creates two sides. Males become the power user and females are supposed as the power used upon. Feminism studies the marginal and suppressed voices of the females. Feminist criticism in its development is "directed towards enlarging and recording the literary canon" (Prasad 268). Patriarchal constructed power with its encompassing nature has become the poignant base for this criticism. The trend of feminism is guided by patriarchal dominating voice.

Feminism has two pillars on which it lays its foundation. They are "female" and "feminine." The first is related to nature and biological whereas the second is socially constructed dimension of a female. "Female" is related to nature while "feminine" is associated with nurture. Beauvoir strikes on this dichotomy when she writes, "femininity is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes one" (qtd. in Moi 209). It exposes that patriarchal social standards of convention and limitations construct femininity from female. Patriarchal standards repair the femininity seems like a natural aspect, yet it is a completely socially constructed and cultural one. For patriarchal perception, "femininity and female" resemble same meaning. Patriarchal norms grounds that the femininity is the completion of femaleness. Thus, the main agenda of feminist criticism remains to clarify this confusion, and expose the mechanism of society and psychology that create such confusion. Nagarajan clarifies this concept when he says:

The two axioms on which feminism is built are 1. gender difference is the foundation for

structural inequality between men and women by which women suffer sympathetic social injustice, and 2. The inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity, but is produced by cultural constructions of gender differences. (206)

This definition clarifies the dichotomy between the femininity and femaleness. It highlights that not all females remain feminine. This becomes the focal point in what ways one defines femininity— in the old patriarchal pattern or in a new feminist way. However, femaleness is biological and natural unlike the femininity that is socially constructed.

As suggested, feminism carries the social and cultural issues. So, the main literary pattern of feminism is to reflect the differentiation between these two polar that relate the qualities of women like sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility and so on. All these aspects have become the fixed parameters to define a woman. The novel shows the quest of the real identity of femaleness. The female voices ring in the novel when one hears the voice of Mikki and Alisha. The subjugated, confined and marginalized feminine qualities change in the mature stage of femaleness that makes them the real spoke persons of feminism. They become new women.

### **Femininity to Femaleness in De's Sisters**

De's novel *Sisters* exhibits the journey of characters from femininity to femaleness. Mikki's and Alisha's quest for identity centers the actions and major events of the novel. The novel discusses very sensitive sides of human life, reflecting social and psychological conflict in the man-woman relationship. It investigates exploitative base of patriarchal Indian social structure.

In the novel, Mikki and Alisha struggle to pursue the identity in the world where male rules and possesses the power. However, they project their ideologies for their evolution that help to topple down the social patterns.

The patriarchal hegemony prevailing in the Indian society creates hurdles for women's empowerment. Mikki and Alisha challenge these hurdles in search of their genuine identity that contrasts with the power structure. They are capable of transforming the paradigm of patriarchal society. De's women are capable of the transfiguration in the suffocating patriarchal paradigms. They struggle for femaleness. So, their quest is for freedom that is turned inward for self-discovery and self-evolution. For this evolution, they believe in coexistence and collaborative effort:

Alisha began brushing her hair vigorously, staring back coldly at her image in the mirror. 'Yes' she said 'I do see we are sisters. You have all the money, all the status, our father's name, his home everything. And I have nothing. That is the difference'.

Mikki tried to put her arm around her. 'That's what I want to change -it you give me the chance. Please. Let us not fight. We need each other . . . .' (26)

Mikki and Alisha sympathize towards each other. But in reality, they are step sisters. Mikki is the legal daughter of Hiralal and Maltiben whereas Alisha is born out of an illicit relationship between Hiralal and Leelaben. They realize that their common problem is the pursuit of identity, not the trifling matters. This shows that they want to transform from the femininity to femaleness. It intensifies the motto of feminism as if they are "arguing instead that gender is a social construct, a learned behavior, a product of culture and its institution" (Murfin and Ray 139). They believe their joint efforts surely bring mobility to transform from the patriarchal subjugation to the most liberal states of womanhood that is the identification of femaleness.

The economic status gives a way out for the liberation from the subjugation and tutelage. The economically deprived women simply concern for livelihood. They cannot break free from domination and confinement. They have to stand on the ground and framework that males have

made. Even more than that middleclass people are serious about moral and ethical standards. Because of this reason, the women belonging to this class are caged in the power structure and its domination than the women of highly privileged and under privileged class. The novel presents it graphically when Alisha craves for money:

You may feel that your life is over but mine is just beginning, I'm not going to waste is sitting in this dump with you. The minute I know we have enough to buy me a ticket out of this garbage heap, I'm going. And listen to me carefully- I'm not coming back. You hear? I'm not going to let my life rot along with yours. I'll be gone, gone, gone, Go on . . . tell me. Where is the money? (37)

Alisha is fully attached to the material growth. She believes that the economic status can liberate from femininity, opening the way to femaleness. Equality in the level of economy is fundamental ground for women to go beyond the cesspool. Alisha, the angel for femaleness, knows this fact.

Alisha lives in suburban part of Bombay and deprived of luxuries. She feels unfortunate when she compares herself to Mikki because she is an illegitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal. Her father never accepted Alisha and her mother legally. She even does not get the name of her father properly. However, she is full of valor, courage, confidence, and strength. She represents the femaleness because it foregrounds on absence of women than their presence. This quest also concerns "with the marginalization of all women that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position" (Guerin et al 197). Alisha realizes this and fights to achieve what she aims for. Her half-sister Mikki also stands emancipation. For that, she readily sleeps with men:

Binny said, I'll keep this short. Yes-I know you are going to the puri party tonight and I'm sure you'll steal the show from the tarty actresses there-but the reason. Perhaps tonight itself. After that young man Navin? -is through with showing you off and impressing his friends and before you snap "how dare you" and hang up on me ... it's business. Strictly business. I think you need me. You are in a tight spot, young lady, and I'm your man and a white charger, you will just have to take my word for it. (52)

This shows the position of women that is largely directed by the patriarchal principles. Here, Mikki stands as a symbol of femininity without any identity. Nevertheless, she utilizes her body to grow up. It becomes her power not the weakness. The body that is taken as the crucial fact of femininity becomes the way for femaleness. "The "body" has become a powerful metaphor of such specificity and concreteness" (Habib 668). It has become a weapon for her. Her body rejects the male established view that chastity is the quality of a woman body. But, she uses it so that she can gain identity.

The society has its ground on power relationship where women are treated as marginalized. And the study of feminism is to deconstruct the power relationship. It remains as a political attack upon other modes of criticism. It focuses on point of biological essentialism because "essentialism (the belief in a given female nature) in the end always plays into the hands of those who want women to conform to predefined patterns of femininity" (Moi 209). In this regard, they have to rebel to wipe out the biasness about their potentialities and capabilities. The novel visualizes this scenario when Mikki says:

Thank you for your advice, Ramankaka. I appreciate the value of your words. But I'd like you to hear a few of mine now. I can't change my sex, unfortunately. That is one thing all of you will have to accept. But I can change just about everything else... and I intend to. Fate has left me in my father's shoes. Had I been the son he never had out constantly longed for, perhaps I might have had more success with the like of you. 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)

Mikki becomes a new woman because she says she cannot change her sex, rather she can create her own identity out of it. Men are dominators only in the domestic spheres. The women are the dominated while only in regard of gender biasness. The scene reverses when the power of femaleness starts to swing. The situation creates struggle to acquire power once again by neglecting the accomplishments of women. Mikki's stand proves that she is a new woman in angelic form with new message and values.

Both men and women are liable for power distribution. The modern women have to assimilate with the dynamics of globalization while at the same time they have to challenge the existing prejudices against them. The novel valorizes the modern female like Mikki and Alisha who have the power to violate the manacles of the male chauvinism.

### **The Female Voice in *Sisters***

The transformation from the femininity to femaleness reflects the scenario of recent social structure where a woman and a man have equal footing. It intensifies the notion that biologically both males and females are equal. Only the nurture creates discrimination. In the novel, the epitome of prejudiced attitude comes out when the solicitors of the company have a greater faith in Ramankaka, a male more than in Mikki, who is a female. This biasness is not because he is a successful businessman, but because Mikki is a woman. This attitude underlies the tendencies of world when sex was identical to the attributes of gender. Ramankaka says to Mikki:

Have you seen the business papers? The stocks have dipper. Shareholders are getting nervous. The market is down as it is. We cannot afford to waste time. I can understand what you must be going through. But the world is a cruel place. There are enough vultures waiting to pounce on you, I don't want anybody to take advantage of your present state of mind. And remember, do not sign anything given by anyone without checking with me first. (11)

The transfiguring equations project a new woman who not only follows the manner of men like dressing, but also their perceptions, and a way of life to disperse the female voices that find the nature of femaleness.

In the development of feminism, the second wave is feminist phase (1880-1920 A.D.) The authors of this wave crossed the feminine phase. Self- exploration became their major issue by breaking the fundamental parameters of patriarchal society. So, by rejecting the patriarchal foundation, "feminist writers had retreated more and more towards a separatist literature of inner space. Psychologically rather than socially focused, this literature sought refuge from the harsh realities and vicious practices of the male world" (Showalter 539). It crystallizes that literatures belonging to this group advocates for the rights of marginalized group. In this case, this novel centralizes the voices of neglected characters like Mikki and Alisha.

In the matter of exploring the female psychology, women of the novel internalize the power structure. They also initialize conflict of their ideologies. When Mikki and Alisha cross the feminine phase, they assimilate with the perceptions of masculinity. The sex cannot be changed, but the gender can be toppled down. It is because the basic premise of feminist criticism is to expose that "sex is biologically determined, while gender is created by society\culture" (Nagarajan 208). In the novel, Mikki contextualizes Ramankaka to know her authority over all males, including himself. She never expects to be viewed like gullible girl. She desires to prove as if she is a

business woman even more dashing like a man. Even the male chauvinist like Ramanbhai perceives her being as a woman of rebellion quality when he asserts, "You've been a brave young lady so far keep it up. And don't worry about anything" (9). It reflects that Mikki is a female not simply following the role of gender prescribed by society. Ramanbhai equalizes Mikki to a male with the qualities of a man who can easily face the problem and contextualize the challenges.

Mikki as a legal daughter possesses the authority over Hiralal's industries. Then, she performs as a perfect business woman. She moves ahead to appoint new business students to save her father's industries. She cares the daily operations of the business. She also understands the financial needs to uplift the industries. She realizes that without the support of males, she cannot save the industry. So she seeks the coordination of male just to gain financial strength. These lines reflect her female voice:

She had committed herself to Hiralal industries for life. That was going to be her future, her destiny while she continued with her speech, the image from her immediate past flashed... No more campus life. No more chasing an MBA, no more being a student on one of the best campuses in the United States. Malika Hiralal was all set to make her way in the corporate world as the undisputed queen of a cluster of companies her father had built from scratch. Mikki squared her shoulders and raised her chin as she made her concluding remarks. She though saw approval in Ramanbhai's eyes as he watched her. (18-19)

Mikki's power of internalization and self-respect vibrate these lines. The unique personality drives in Mikki make her run after love and affection. But the power of female mind empowers her to be the safeguard of the business. This leads her to be successful in the world of business.

Mikki, as a female, changes herself after her marriage to Binny. During their honeymoon in Bali, Binny abruptly narrates the subject of business. She queries Binny what she can do after returning to Bombay. She got the answer that pathetically represents the pronouncement of women's enslavement:

Be my slave, of course, 'Binny answered full time?' She pouted  
'Full time', he confirmed.

Mikki said: Darling... be serious. I am used to a busy schedule, a business to run... I can't just sit around doing nothing?

Binny answered casually, 'you won't be doing nothing. Looking beautiful is a serious business. Women work hard at it. And full time. (109)

What a subjugation and form of tutelage in the society of male chauvinism! A successful businesswoman is going to be exchanged in the form of a simple house wife. Mikki, in this situation, recognizes her secondary position where gender creates hierarchal rank. However, she does not give any chance to tremble the voice of female.

Mikki insists on handling the part in the business. Her husband Binny declares tersely, "Women stay at home and make sure the place perfectly run. They fulfill their husband's every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office-going is there. No business meetings" (59). This is the traditional hierarchy between men and women. Mikki as a new woman speaks the voice of female to come out of such cesspool. The novel depicts this realistically:

All marriage turns like this. Perhaps not quite so quickly. But certainly after a year or so. Besides, the man is really busy. I don't know what women like us are

looking for. Why don't you listen to Binny and get involved with charity work and things? Get out of that home of yours. You sit here day in and day out like a moping canary in a gilded caged. What's the point? You have married a man of the world...not a poet. Be realistic. Don't expect him to mollycoddle you-he has better things to do. (116-117)

This is the power of a female voice that Mikki speaks. She is not simply the handiwork of male dominated society; rather she has the right to listen her inner voice. She is a female and she has to listen, internalize, and speak the voice of female. This is the power of femaleness. In this regard, she is a representative character of feminism and feminist criticism because "the be-all and end-all of feminist criticism is to promote gender equality" (Nagarajan 2008). Mikki breaks the constructed dichotomy of gender because she hears the voice that she is a female. And this is the essence of femaleness.

### Conclusion

The novel projects of female characters that break free from socially constructed feminine attributes. They visualize the real and new female that is in them. Even though Mikki and Alisha are the woman of feminine attributes, they prove to be revolutionary angels at the later part of their life. They stand as the spokespersons for subjugated women who have to seek the emancipation. They express their identity. Their exploration of female identity breaks the male's confinement. Mikki's shyness and faithfulness as housewife finally erupt violently for the sake of a new woman inside him. She pushes Binny out of her life, and exists as a female first. She pursues for her biological nature. When Mikki and Alisha are united, their power becomes vibrant. They reject the traditional attributes of femininity and they visualize real new women inside them. That is their essence of femaleness. They refuse the constructed gender ideology while searching their femaleness. Their actions and female voice enable them to cross male-centered social structure. They search the path in the pathless land. At first, they are marginalized psychologically and physically as they have to accept the attributes of femininity. They break free from the dogmas, tutelage, and rituals fixed by male patriarchal parameters of the society. Both of them pass through a painstaking journey of self-realization that leads from femininity to femaleness in the novel. So, they could cross the tutelage. Their quests from femininity to femaleness give birth to the new women, who ultimately attain the female self. They thus blow the voice of revolutionary angels in the society.

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