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**FROM HOPE TO HEARTBREAK: AMRITA'S DREAMS, DISAPPOINTMENTS AND
DISILLUSIONMENTS IN SHOBHA DE'S *STRANGE OBSESSION***

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Abstract

Through the journey of its protagonist, Amrita, Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* explores the intricate relationship between ambition, desire, and psychological torment. The story deftly contrasts the severe emotional and psychological challenges she faces with her ambition to establish a prosperous career in modeling. Amrita's early dreams are full of promise and hope, reflecting her aspirations for success and freedom. However, the pivotal moment in her life occurs when she encounters Meenakshi, a dangerously obsessive individual. Shobha De examines the darker facets of interpersonal relationships—power dynamics, emotional dependence, and the erosion of individuality—through Meenakshi's possessiveness and manipulative behaviour. Amrita's journey from a self-assured, aspirational woman to someone grappling with disillusionment and despair starkly highlights the detrimental effects of toxic relationships on mental health. The novel also critiques broader social pressures on women, such as the commodification of female bodies in industries like modeling and the lack of support systems for women facing abuse. Amrita's transition from optimism to heartbreak serves as a metaphor for a broader commentary on the fragility of human aspirations when confronted with oppressive circumstances. *Strange Obsession* becomes a poignant exploration of vulnerability, identity, and resilience, thanks to De's compelling narrative style and nuanced characterization. Through the lens of Amrita's unfulfilled dreams, psychological struggles, and the societal norms exacerbating her plight, this essay delves into the protagonist's harrowing yet illuminating journey.

Keywords

Shobha De, *Strange Obsession*, Amrita, toxic relationships, psychological abuse, disillusionment, societal pressures, female identity, ambition, resilience.

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Shobha De is a well-known Indian author, writer, and social critic, often hailed as the "Jackie Collins of India" for her bold and incisive prose. De, born in Satara, Maharashtra, on 7 January, 1948, attended St. Xavier's College in Mumbai, where she obtained a degree in psychology. She began her career in journalism by founding and serving as editor of several lifestyle publications, such as *Society* and *Stardust*. R. K. Dhawan writes about Shobha De, "One of the major reasons for Shobha De's popularity as a writer is her intimate understanding of women and their problems" (Dhawan 11). Shobha De's foray into fiction established her as a literary icon. The glitzy yet hollow lives of India's elite were portrayed in her 1989 debut novel, *Socialite Evenings*. *Sultry Days* (1994), *Second Thoughts* (1996), and *Starry Nights* (1990) followed, exploring themes of relationships, ambition, and the sociocultural dynamics of metropolitan India. Shobha De continues to be a significant voice in Indian literature, pushing boundaries and sparking discussions on taboo subjects. Residing in Mumbai, she remains an influential figure in shaping India's literary and cultural landscape. Dr. R. Bharathi writes about Shobha De:

Shobha De' doesn't raise her voice against women's oppression from people, she reveals just how independent women are fighting to obtain their autonomy and goal. She portrays the modern way of life of women who live so that they have unlimited freedom. (Bharathi 1485)

Amrita Aggrawal is the central female protagonist of Shobha De's *Strange Obsession*. She is a young, beautiful, and ambitious woman determined to make her mark as a model. Her beauty is celebrated from birth, with her brothers proclaiming, "She is so pretty. So perfect. She is going to be the most beautiful woman in the world" (De 2). Her father's repeated assertion that "this child is special" reflects the family's pride in her extraordinary attributes. Fueled by her aspirations, Amrita decides to leave her home in Delhi and move to Mumbai, a city that promises opportunities and challenges. Despite societal objections, such as Mrs. Setia's warning to her mother, "How can you allow such a young girl to go to Mumbai all by herself?"

(De 1), Amrita's mother supports her, confident in her daughter's ability to face the hurdles ahead. Amrita's resolve is evident in her response to the suggestion of modelling opportunities in Delhi: "Yes, there are... third rate models posing for Ludhiana Wollen Mills, that's not my style" (De 1). Her boldness, passion for fashion, and self-assuredness set the stage for her journey into the dazzling yet treacherous world of Mumbai's glamour industry. The novel opens with a vivid pictorial imagery of Amrita's aspirations and beauty. Amrita's transition from Delhi to Mumbai is marked by a mixture of excitement, determination, and caution. Her father's parting words, "We trust you, beti. Bombay is different from Delhi. You already know that. Take care of yourself" (De 3), resonate as both encouragement and a reminder of the challenges she might face.

Upon her arrival in Mumbai, she encounters the chaos and brusqueness of city life when she collides with a taxi, spilling her belongings onto the street. In this moment of vulnerability, Minx, a mysterious yet confident woman, comes to her aid. Introducing herself as the daughter of Inspector General V.S. Iyengar, Minx displays authority and charm, which immediately draws Amrita's attention. Minx's admiration for Amrita's beauty is apparent as she remarks, "You are gorgeous... You know that? Of course you are. Everybody must be telling you so" (De 6). Minx directs Amrita to an agency run by her uncle, solidifying their connection and introducing Amrita to Mumbai's fast-paced world. Minx's role as a guide and her favourability with local individuals provide Amrita with a sense of security, but it also hints at the power dynamics and complexities that will soon unfold in their relationship.

Amrita's life in Mumbai begins uneventfully, with her focused efforts to achieve her dream of becoming a superstar. However, her world takes a sharp and irreversible turn when she encounters Minx, a mysterious and enigmatic figure. Amrita soon finds herself ensnared in Minx's manipulative web, struggling to process the unexpected and unsettling events that unfold. By the time she discovers that Minx is a lesbian, it is too late—her life has already spiralled into chaos. What begins as a chance encounter transforms into a tumultuous and nightmarish relationship, marked by Minx's obsessive control and Amrita's reluctant entanglement in a lustful dynamic. In his article titled "*Strange Obsession: A Critical Study*," Gajendra Kumar writes:

Shobha De's explosive novel revolves around the life and lustful relationship of two young women, Amrita and Meenakshi. Fundamentally, it seems to be a psychological documentation of sexual obsession of mysterious woman Meenakshi, also known as minx and her calamitous end. According to him, both of them represent the different kinds of topology of modern urban set up...It is through their behavior and conversation that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of these two young women - Minx and Amrita. (Kumar 228)

The novel does not shy away from explicit depictions of lesbianism, a theme that is both bold and unexpected, especially coming from a female author. Scenes like the following illustrate this daring approach, "She was not wearing the bra. She never did. Amrita had seen her taut nipple through the form-fitting, sweatshirt she frequently wore. Guiding her hand, she traced a line over a jagged scar which began under her breasts and went all the way under the armpit" (De 92). Despite the critical backlash, Shobha De remained unapologetic, highlighting a societal issue that remains contentious. Lesbianism, while increasingly recognized in contemporary discourse, still faces resistance in society. Simone de Beauvoir aptly encapsulates such struggles in *The Second Sex*, shedding light on the enduring challenges faced by women

navigating their identities in a patriarchal world. Simone De Beauvoir, as pointed out in *The Second Sex*:

The Lesbian, in fact, is distinguished by her refusal of the male and her liking for feminine flesh; but every adolescent female fears penetration and repulsion for the male body, on the other hand the female body is for her as for the male an object of desire. (Beauvoir 427)

Such lustful relationships are prevalent in modern society, particularly among girls who live away from their parents. Shobha De fearlessly depicts frank sexual and nude scenes in the novel:

Minx removed her clothes one by one and placed them neatly on the chair close to the bed... She felt her legs open as almost voluntarily as Minx climbed upon her straddling her slim hips with her own, covering her breasts with her hands, cupping the nipples and circling them repeatedly till they ached with a sweet pain. (De 97)

Shobha De seeks to reveal the broken hopes of naive females as well as the realities of the glitzy world. In order to thrive in the film industry, they are forced to abide by the demands of powerful people. Amrita learns that photographer Karan is also attracted to her and wants to be intimate, but she turns him down. Because of his odd obsession, Karan begs Amrita's spouse for permission to kiss her even after Amrita and Rakesh are married. But she obeys his orders, even though she doesn't talk to him throughout long photo sessions. To get away from Minx, Karan advises Amrita to move, but Minx is crafty and can go anywhere. She wants to return to her home and abandon her ambition since she is disappointed. She wishes to get out of the predicament. "There was no way she could undo it now. No way she could reverse what had transpired between Minx and her. She also knew that she would have to live with one big regret for the rest of her life" (De 105). Shobha De seeks to reveal the broken hopes of naive females as well as the realities of the glitzy world. In order to thrive in the film industry, they are forced to abide by the demands of powerful people. Amrita learns that photographer Karan is also attracted to her and wants to be intimate, but she turns him down. Because of his odd obsession, Karan begs Amrita's spouse for permission to kiss her even after Amrita and Rakesh are married. But she obeys his orders, even though she doesn't talk to him throughout long photo sessions. To get away from Minx, Karan advises Amrita to move, but Minx is crafty and can go anywhere. She wants to return to her home and abandon her ambition since she is disappointed. She wishes to get out of the predicament.

Amrita quickly understands Minx's intentions when she enters her room after midnight, only to find Minx waiting for her on the bed. Amrita, curious and cautious, asks Minx about her expectations, receiving an unambiguous response. Minx openly expresses her desire for physical intimacy with Amrita, but Amrita, repulsed by the idea, vehemently rejects her. In a moment of defiance, she declares, "You are a manipulating bitch and I hate you. I really do. But you can't get away with this for long... wait and see" (De 117).

Shobha De crafts this novel to highlight the vulnerabilities of young women, especially those who find themselves in unfamiliar cities, far from the safety and guidance of their families. The narrative serves as a warning about individuals like Minx, who exploit the naivety of others for their own gain. As Minx manipulates Amrita, deriving sadistic pleasure from her, she confesses an intense, obsessive love, saying, "And then I met you, I fell in love. A love so intense I felt my body would burst" (De 93). This love, however, is not pure but driven by a dangerous obsession. Minx, unable to restrain herself, relentlessly pursues Amrita, declaring

with an unsettling finality, "After last night, darling, no explanations are necessary. You belong to me and I belong to you, it's that simple" (De 96).

Amrita, despite being aware of the wrongness of her involvement, feels trapped and unable to break free from Minx's hold. Minx vows to build a "temple of love" for them, but this so-called love is nothing more than madness. She deifies Amrita, viewing her as a goddess to be worshipped. After kissing Amrita, Minx exclaims, "I worship you... You are my goddess... My Devi... I live for you. I shall die for you" (De 107). This extreme obsession is explored by Dr. Naresh K. Vats, who notes that De treats the theme of sex in great detail, especially Minx's sadistic homosexual tendencies, marking the height of alternative sexuality in the narrative (Vats 104).

Minx assumes the dominant role in their relationship, seeking complete possession of Amrita. Her behaviour grows increasingly erratic and controlling, as seen in her violent reaction to Amrita's association with Rover. Minx's associate terrorizes Rover, an act of cruelty driven by Minx's irrational jealousy and possessiveness. When Amrita questions Mr. Iyengar, Minx's father, about his daughter's behavior and its impact on him as a parent, he responds cautiously, revealing his fear: "I was always afraid of her... Scared of her rage, unsure of what she might do if I reacted... But my men, the few I trust kept an eye on her most of the time. But Meenakshi outwitted them also" (De 205). Minx's father, too, is powerless against her manipulative and destructive nature, unable to control her actions. Amrita is fully aware of the critical and dangerous position she finds herself in, but feels trapped by Minx's overwhelming influence. Amrita is acutely aware of the precarious position she finds herself in due to Minx. Fully conscious of the circumstances, Amrita vehemently protests, "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life being controlled by a pervert. And forget it—I won't come back to Bombay with you. Neither will I stay in your home—what nerve! Don't worry about my mother—sooner or later she'll see through you. She isn't such a fool. I'd rather die than live with you" (118).

Amrita's strong stance finally sets the stage for their conflict. She finds no emotional fulfillment in this hollow relationship, always burdened with guilt. She yearns to break free from this situation, dreaming of a male savior who will rescue her. Each time she encounters a man, she entertains the hope of escaping Minx's twisted game. However, she fails to overcome the typical feminine inclination that seeks nothing but male companionship. Eventually, Amrita's parents intervene and arrange her marriage to Rakesh, aiming to extricate her from this predicament. When Amrita finally leaves Minx, the latter struggles to adapt to the changed circumstances, succumbing to a psychoneurotic state driven by her obsession with Amrita.

Their confrontation is finally set up by Amrita's firm position. She is constantly troubled by guilt and gets no emotional fulfillment in this meaningless relationship. Dreaming of a masculine savior who will save her, she longs to escape this predicament. She hopes to get away from Minx's perverse game every time she meets a man. But she is unable to escape the natural feminine tendency that craves only male company. In an attempt to save her from this situation, Amrita's parents finally step in and set up her marriage to Rakesh. When Amrita eventually leaves Minx, she finds it difficult to adjust to the new situation and eventually gives in to a psychoneurotic state brought on by her fixation with Amrita.

Amrita wants to get married just to escape and relieve from Minx. For that Amrita says, "Rakesh was the one who was going to help her escape! Amrita felt a tingling sensation down her spine at the prospect. She did not care who he was, what he did or how he looked. All she was interested in was getting out" (De 203). Amrita intended to end her relationship with Minx in this manner. Rakesh was very adaptable and lovable to her before and after their marriage,

therefore she married him for that reason. He was able to comprehend Amrita's premarital issues and made an effort to address them. Amrita made the right decision in selecting Rakesh. Amrita wants to be married in order to get away from Minx. In light of this, she says, "Rakesh was the one who was going to help her escape! Amrita felt a tingling sensation down her spine at the prospect. She did not care who he was, what he did or how he looked. All she was interested in was getting out" (De 203). This describes Amrita's strategy to end her relationship with Minx. She so weds Rakesh, who both before and after their marriage demonstrates empathy and affection. He tries to address Amrita's premarital problems because he understands them. It turns out that Amrita made the right decision in choosing Rakesh. As a result, the story changes when Amrita Agrawal eventually escapes Minx's grasp and starts a new chapter in her life with Rakesh. Rakesh provides Amrita with love, stability, and the opportunity to be in a healthy relationship once she leaves the toxic relationship.

At the end of the novel, Amrita is relieved that Minx is no longer involved because she is no longer subjected to the abuse and manipulation she suffered. After overcoming the severe emotional distress that was imposed upon her, she comes out as a stronger person. According to the article, Amrita's path is a victory of empowerment and self-discovery as she overcomes the toxic and sinister cravings that had held her back. Amrita is committed to embracing a more promising future. As Amrita moves on in her life and away from the alluring shadows that formerly engulfed her, the story suggests that she may find happiness and healing. P. Anusooya and Dr. T.S. Ramesh write about this novel, "It portrays two young women Amrita and Meenakshi who is known as Minx. They have lesbian bond because of the outcome of hatred and deception of men" (Anusooya and Ramesh 1415).

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