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## AN APPROACH AND PRACTICE TO WRITING ENGLISH NOVELS ON LESBIANISM: A STUDY OF POST-MODERN INDIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS FROM LATE TWENTIETH TO PRESENT CENTURY

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### **Abstract:**

*Now lesbianism is not an unfamiliar term as it was decades ago. Today many literatures are being written along with films to highlight the issue and it has given rise to two classes- one who are in against of it and another, very few who have taken it positively showing liberal attitude. This present paper aims at presentations of this debated issue exploring many hidden realities about lesbianism through select works of Post-Modern Indian Women English Novelists - Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Rita Garg, Anita Nair and Abha Daweswar who have tried to reach the feminine sensibility to understand the reasons working behind this apparent peculiar choice depreciated and derogated in the eye of society.*

**Keywords:** *Lesbianism, Sexuality, Love, Postmodern, Feminine.*

Currently many postmodern Indian women writers are taking interest in depicting lesbian relations in their fictions. Many of them have already produced remarkable lesbian literature over the years, keeping alive the issue of inequality in love through their compelling stories. However, it does not mean that lesbianism is a modern birth in Indian literature as many thinks so blaming it as a western import. Lesbianism has been an integral part of society ever since it came into being. The main reason behind non-availability or rarity of explicit references about lesbianism in ancient Indian texts and literatures was contemporary social taboo which restricted women to come out into the open. During ancient times, lesbianism was considered an evil practice and a crime that was punished with fine or social ignominy. Books like *Arthashastra*, *Manusmriti* prove that the practice of lesbianism is very old in disrepute and ignoble form. With the advancement of civilization and awakening amongst women, the scenario started to change. In Pre-colonial India, Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1941) set the trend. Had it not been written long back, it would have set the trend for writing and bringing into the open more lesbian literature but it did not happen due to prevailing social pressures at that time. After independence Kamala Das' autobiography *My Story* (1976) perhaps was a bold attempt at discussing lesbianism at a time when it was furtively hidden. Literature had been rather conservative in exploring openly lesbianism till 1980s and 1990s till Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* was published in 2000. Since 2000, there has been an extraordinary rise in the number of works produced in this area. The emergence of a new generation of Indian women novelists in the present century who tend to interrogate the tradition and images of women in terms of femininity and female identities and patriarchal value, led to a radical change in attitude towards sex, social roles and marital relationships. This concept makes many Indian woman novelists to explore female subjectivity. Among these post-modern Indian women novelists, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, Rita Garg and Abha Daweswar are the most glaring personalities.

In most of her novels, Shobha De turns down heterosexuality to welcome lesbianism. She shows her preference of woman to woman relation or lesbianism over man to woman relationship, which she has portrayed in her novels. Factors working behind this woman to woman relationship are a woman feels

needs of another woman better than a man, wants to revolt against prevailing social norms and patriarchy which subordinate her to man and tries to secure a distinctive identity and place without becoming a tool at man's hand. In her novels *Starry Night*, *Strange Obsession* and *Snapshots*, Shobha De raises her voice of denial, deconstructs man-made image of woman and thus creates an alternative female identity which crosses all the social limitations imposed on them, performing dual role of 'man' and 'free woman'.

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani is free from traditional gender roles and sexual constraints. She is a free thinker and lives on her own. As regards sex and gender role she steps out all the boundaries of feminine conduct defined by masculine Indian culture sacrificing heterosexuality on the altar of lesbianism which gives her real sexual pleasure of which heterosexuality, according to her, is devoid of. She loves Akshay Kumar but he treats her badly after his marriage. Her tormented soul gets recovery only after she decides freely to make relationship with women, be it Thai girls or the *Showbiz* reporter Linda. Aasha undergoes never to be forgotten thrill of the female flesh from two Thai masseurs from Bangkok when she goes to Dubai to recover from the trauma of Akshay-affair. There Badshah, the Gold King offers her lavish hospitality. In his *harem* she gathers a unique experience of *Sandwich Massage*. She finds the two girl's ministrations most pleasurable over her body: *"It was an experience, so sensuous, so arousing, so complete, that it was weeks before she could forget the feel of two, smooth, soft, oiled, practically breastless bodies on either side of her, touching, licking, stroking every naked inch, making her skin tingle and come alive in a way she couldn't have imagined possible"*. (De, Shobha: 2012:112) Though Aasha Rani has several sexual relationships in the novel, her experience with two Thai masseurs during Sandwich Massage at Badshah's *harlem* in Dubai is *"the greatest orgasms of her life"*. (Ibid, 112-113)

Aasha Rani seeks another lesbian relationship with Linda whom she meets after her arrival from New Zealand. *"Aasha Rani was thrilled that she had Linda in her life. It came to a point where she wouldn't make a move without her"*. (Ibid, 133) Earlier she has built relationship with many men but every time she has felt there some sort of wanting. The memory of *Sandwich Massage* combining of passion, intimacy and sweetness received from two Thai girls never fades from her consciousness. Whenever she makes sexual relationship with men she feels something missing in those relationships. Sexual relationship with men is phallic-centered as it only revolves around copulation which subordinates other things necessarily needed in love. On the other hand, Lesbian relationship driven by mutuality of love instead of duality of love is unrestrictive and satisfying. Linda provides her fleshy warmth, security, love and of course sexual pleasure which she has failed throughout to get from any of her contacts with man. This experience proves for her the fulfillment of a long felt need. *"In the turbulent life of the heroine, the lesbian experience was something different and something fulfilling, an emotional Oasis."* (Pandey, Prabhat Kumar:2011:207) Linda reminds her same level of sensory pleasure as she received from Thai girls: *"It was a pleasant feeling, Aasha Rani thought. No rough bristles scraping her face, just smooth cheeks and soft lips over her own. A memory flashed in her head of the Thai masseuses."* (De, Shobha: 2012:135) Linda challenges heterosexuality before the same-sex love: *"Stay loose, stay with me, you will forget men, you will forget everything you'e known before."* (Ibid, 136) She shows confident that a woman can play well the substitute role of a man in same-sex love. *"But let me ride first. Let me show you that I can take you like a man too."* (Ibid, 137)

Look how Aasha Rani is entertained by Linda with same multi-sensory experience as she received from Thai Masseurs during her stay at Dubai: *"Her fingers began massaging Aasha Rani's neck as once again she bent over her to kiss her...Her hands moved from Aasha Rani's neck to her breasts. She kept kissing her gently, probing her mouth with an eager tongue. Reaching under Aasha Rani's shirt she unhooked her bra...Her head moved down till her mouth found Aasha Rani's breasts. There was no resistance left any more. Aasha Rani's entire body was floating-her mind was adrift. She let her arms drop to her sides as Linda's warm thigh wedged itself between hers and her hand moved between Aasha Rani's legs. Aasha Rani groaned with pleasure. Linda refused to stop. She'd become more aggressive now and her*

*hands pummeled Aasha Rani's body, exploring every inch of it. Unexpectedly she grabbed the bottle of brandy and poured some between Aasha Rani's open legs...The sensation was unbelievably arousing. Aasha Rani wanted to growl and scream with excitement, but she remembers Lucy lying next door, and suppressed the urge.*" (Ibid, 136-37) Linda's fleshy warmth gives her emotional security, love and pleasure: "Yes, she thought, this is what it should be, tender, beautiful and erotic. In a way it could never be with a man." (Ibid, 137) Here Linda's free and frank confession on superiority of feminine traits, "tender, beautiful and erotic", to masculine traits that combine selfishness, lack of self-control and violence is the main ideal of Cultural Feminism which mainly focuses on the supremacy of women-centered culture than masculine culture reclaiming and redefining female identity.

In *Strange Obsession*, 'Electra Complex' causes Minx's transformation into a lesbian. The novel is Minx's psychological drama of pain and suffering. Her attraction towards her father at her tender age of thirteen, her delusion that it is not she who wants physical relationship but her father and her projection that her father rapes her, all these and many other factors like her loneliness and her childhood beatings received from her father turns her to lesbianism. She develops hatred for her own father and every man: "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" (De, Shobha: 1992:45). Minx's disgust to man is so high that she even does not hesitate to undergo for a surgery to remove her breasts. She says to Amrita: "No sweet Heart. Nobody hurt me. Maybe I hurt myself. I thought it would make you happy...It's a tits job...Well...most women go to this surgeon for cosmetic surgery to enhance their breasts-boy! I could give you a few names-but I actually asked him to reduce mine. You know, slice them off" (Ibid, 93). The word, "slice them off" used by Minx in her speech shows her innate hatred she has developed within for men. It shows her inability to bear what man likes in woman.

*"According to Jones and Hesnard, lesbians mostly fall into two categories: "masculine lesbians," who "try to act like men," and "feminine" ones, who "are afraid of men."* (Beauvoir, Simone de: 2010:420)

In Minx's case, she belongs to the category of "masculine lesbians". Her choice of this category of lesbianism is not the result of her natural outcome but the circumstances are responsible for it. "Refusal to make oneself an object is not always what leads a woman to homosexuality...Circumstances also have an important part in this choice." (Dhawan, R.K:2008:20) Loneliness, depression, ill-treatment and many other negative elements that resulted from masculine torture, exploitation and domination are working factors behind Minx's transformation. Cultural feminism thinks that all men are oppressive to all women as a class and that it is the responsibility of individual men to give up male supremacy, rather than the responsibility of women to change and transform themselves. Minx transforms herself as she feels no choice has been left for her. Challenging the masculine culture which knows little the meanings of patience, feeling and love and is the cause of many ills and evils Minx tries for establishment of feminine culture through her transformation.

In *Snapshots* Surekha does not get physical satisfaction from her husband Harsh Shah, so she chooses the path of lesbianism making relationship with her school-mate Dolly. "There was little they didn't know about one another; menstrual cycles, pre-menstrual headaches, anxieties big and small. Surekha did most of the talking, using Dolly to pour out her daily frustration, minor bickering with her mother-in-law, major fights with husband, arguments with her child's class teacher, defiance from old servants, even dissatisfaction with her sex life. Surprisingly, Dolly was not jealous. She didn't consider Surekha's husband a rival. He was merely the man who paid all the bills and demanded his conjugal rights periodically. She knew Surekha hated having sex with him detested every coupling. But both of them were practical enough to realize that that was the ticket to keeping the marriage going. Besides, as Surekha often told her, 'What is there? It doesn't cost anything. I open my legs mechanically and stare at the clock on the wall across the bed. It's all over in about six to eight minutes'. Dolly's dependence on Surekha was more

*profound. Surekha was her crutch, her sanity, her love. There was nothing she wouldn't do to make Surekha happy. And Dolly undertook her little tasks unhesitatingly, ungrudgingly, unreservedly. There was little in life for her beyond Surekha.*" (De, Shobha: 2013:169)

Both Dolly and Surekha are "*an intense, mutually-dependent camaraderie*" (Ibid, 170). Having in relationship over the years, the life of one has become meaningless without the other. "*Their lives had become inextricably intertwined. Dolly and Surekha were like a well-adjusted, happily married couple. There was no passion to deal with any longer. Just enough physical familiarity to provide regular comfort*" (Ibid). In the act of lesbianism they are neither subject nor object, they play whatever role they wish. Their relationship echoes to what Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most famous cultural historians says in her most celebrated book *The Second Sex*, "*Inversely, a woman who wants to enjoy the pleasures of her femininity in feminine arms also knows the pride of obeying no master...the association of two women can take many different forms; it is based on feeling, interest, or habit; it is conjugal or romantic; it has room for sadism, masochism, generosity, faithfulness, devotion, caprice, egotism, and betrayal; there are prostitutes as well as great lovers among lesbians*". (Beauvoir, Simone de: 2010:431)

Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*, Minx in *Strange Obsession* and Surekha in *Snapshots* are victims of male dominated patriarchal society where women are supposed to be the desired objects of man, often distant and enigmatic, and not the subject of (not the one who experiences) passion. Shobha De's new women are above age old malist culture and tradition which divides role of woman different from that of man. Shobha De's women create their own domain of feminist culture violating traditional men-made culture and social code. Through lesbianism they undergo a radical change. Lesbianism gives them escapade from desired objects to desiring subject. They are not submissive to injustices imposed on them by the value structure of male dominated culture. Aasha Rani, Minx and Surekha are new rebellious women who want an equal footing with man instead of being flown along the current of male dominated value-structure. In the value-structure of male-dominated culture, familial and societal maladjustments lead women to inner fragmentation thereby forcing them to adopt lesbianism in order to seek emotional outlets. Lesbianism establishes female autonomy over the value-structure of male dominated culture. It opens a new vista to women giving a lesson of how to struggle against male domination. What Linda and Aasha Rani, Minx and Amrita and Surekha and Dolly share are manifestations of the new woman who seeks fulfillment within her own sex as declared by Aasharani to Linda, "*Only a woman can really please another woman sexually. Only another woman knows where to touch, when to touch, how to touch...*" (De, Shobha: 2012:156) This self-same assertive tone of Aasharani again echoes on another occasion and this time to a man when she says to Jamie, "*Actually, if you must know, I prefer girls. They are so sensitive and soft. This, only another woman can know- how to turn a woman on*" (Ibid, 218). Here the phrase, "so sensitive and soft" used by Aasharani throws light indirectly on the darker side of masculine traits of insensitiveness and hardness. Cultural Feminism considers masculine culture as an enemy to feminine culture, not for many but for only one strong reason that it depreciates and derogates feminine qualities against which De's new and rebellious female characters raise their voice of protest.

Anita Nair followed the trend of lesbianism with her novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001), which is the story of five women from different backgrounds and deals with lesbian encounters through Marikolanthu, thirty one years old and an unwed mother from rural background. Anita Nair, with a deep, psychological insight, skillfully utilizes the story of Marikolanthu to comment upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women from rural background. Marikolanthu's story recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. Marikolanthu undergoes humiliation and debasement, which result in negating her son Muthu, the one who escaped many attempts of abortion. He is the result of her seduction by Murugesan, one of the Chettiar's sons belonging to one of the richest families where her mother works as a cook. She looks after her house when her mother goes for work; later when her mother is seriously ill, she is employed at the Chettiar's house.

There, she is assigned with the work of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. There develops a deep and intimate lesbian relationship between Marikolanthu, one who is deprived of the society and Sujata Akka, other who is deprived of her husband. They find mutual happiness in their nearness.

Manju Kapoor's novel *A Married Woman* (2002), is more robustly lesbian in plot than Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. The novel takes after its name from Astha, a married woman who gets married to Hemant, an attractive young man. Astha leads a happy conjugal life with Hemant for a few years and becomes a mother of a baby girl, Anuradha. Her husband Hemant insists on taking due care of the child. The keen interest taken in the baby girl enhances Astha's love and affection for Hemant. When Astha was expecting Anuradha, Hemant tells her that he longs for a baby girl. He gives Astha his negative remark over categorization between male and female in India: "*In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating out women this way?*" (Kapur, Manju: 2002: 57). Astha is drawn more to her husband. Her enjoyment knows no boundary when she notices her husband's keen interest in the upbringing of their daughter. But what seems real proves false reality in her later life. Soon reversal of situation takes place in Astha's life. Hemant becomes more and more occupied with his business and thus he struggles to spare time to spend with Astha. She observes an unexpected behavioral change in Hemant when he demands a son before Astha. "*I want to have my son soon,*" declared Hemant, looking emotional and manly at the same time. "*I want to be as much a part of his life as Papaji is of mine.*" (Ibid, 61) "*Hemant's desire to have a son and his insistence that he would not stop until he has one, makes Astha dissatisfied and uneasy. She cannot fathom her man.*" (Chakravarty, Joya: 2006: 202) Hemant's indifference and unsupportive attitude fills emptiness in Astha's life. Astha's craving for Hemant's love and appreciation remains incomplete all the time. Physicality of love completes but there always remains wanting of emotion. "*For Astha a marital life meant participating in all activities, discussing all issues with her husband but for Hemant this relationship meant physical relationship and just fulfilling the social needs of his wife.*" (Verma, Anuradha: 2007: 56) However, Astha does not violate sanctity of relationship between her and her husband making relationship with other man, rather she seeks alternate sexuality in Pipeelika's embrace. "*Astha does not want to cross the threshold of her married life: she does not want any other man. What Manju Kapur is hinting at is that had Hemant been more appreciative of and sensitive to his wife's needs, Astha would have felt a more complete woman*" (Chakravarty, Joya: 2006: 204).

Astha meets Pipeelika, a widow woman whose husband Aijaz recently has met a sudden death in an act of religious animosity. Soon there develops intimacy and friendship between them as condition of both women is same one has lost her husband and other is deprived of what she expects from her husband. The meeting proves fruitful in the life of both women. Pipeelika enters into Astha's life like the first few raindrops on parched land. "*Astha's slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from a hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika leads her to an immoral, rather amoral, guilt consciousness of lesbian love rationalizing her outmoded morality.*" (Sharma, Ram: 2009:02) Pipeelika renews Astha's life with what she later feels wanting in her life. Her presence in Astha's life fills the gap of Hemant in her life. She discovers the long forgotten pleasures of life. There follows a torrid affair between them. Both of them overstep social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each other's arms. Astha begins to go Pipeelika whenever she gets opportunity for gratification of her sexual needs. Sexual satisfaction as observed by Joseph Bristow "*Is a fundamental human need.*" (Bristow, Joseph: 1997: 12) Both the women are benefitted of this relationship. While Pipeelika drinks the water of Lethe (i.e. the River of Forgetfulness) to forget her husband Aijaz making lesbian relationship with Astha, Astha takes a sweet revenge on her husband Hemant through the weapon of this relationship. Astha's choice of alternate sexuality in the form of lesbianism destabilizes the whole system of sex regulation.

The physicality of their relationship proves satisfying through their lesbian relationship because it

is based on care, love and mutual respect for each other. Instead of becoming the desired object of male hegemony, often distant and enigmatic, and not the subject of (not the one who experiences) passion, both Astha and Pipeelika go beyond their subalternity of position breaking the age old tradition which divides role of woman different from that of man and create their own domain violating tradition and social code. Lesbianism gives them escapade from desired objects to desiring subjects. Through this lesbian relationship they come under certain circumstances, there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity. With this relationship Astha faces same difficulty of subalternity faced by colonial Indian women as specified by Spivak, “*caught between tradition and modernization*” finding herself torn between two halves-her desire for love and affection and her duty towards her family. “*Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship.*” (Kumar, Ashok: 2008: 134) However, Astha shows 'Astha' (Faith) over lesbianism relationship and tries to hold its grip firmly even after finding herself standing between the forces of traditional male hegemony and the desire of individuality over subalternity.

Contrary to what Spivak asserts in her most celebrated book “*Can the subaltern Speak?*”, “*the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow*”, (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: 1988: 271-313) Manju Kapur's female protagonist Astha comes out from the shadowy life of subalternity challenging male hegemony. Through reversal role of her protagonist Astha in terms of subalternity Manju Kapur reconsiders the institutions of love, marriage and relationship: “*Manju Kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance with passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonist from which they suffer and perish in for their triumph.*” (Kumar, Ashok: 2008: 165) Thus Astha in Manju Kapur's “*A married Woman,*” appearing as a new woman who is educated, self-conscious, and introspective and one who knows how to carve a life for herself and even one who conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes, does not come into the class of sexual subalternity dominated by male hegemony.

In Rita Garg's novel *Precursor of Love*, the Girl is a lesbian who has more than one partner in the book. Her easygoing life and attitude attracts Amilya, the protagonist. A sudden encounter sparks off their friendship. Next friendship turns into love and then their relationship brings about a radical change in their life. The loneliness and alienation in her life pushes Amilya to make friendship with the Girl. The Girl's personality attracts Amilya very much and she treats her as a muse for her novel. Even though Amilya is older than the Girl, it is seen right from the beginning that the Girl has the upper hand in the relationship. In every sense of the word she plays the role of a 'man' in the relationship. She never comes in between Amilya's choice of anything, but successfully tries to manipulate Amilya with her emotional attitudes. Their relationship with each other is symbiotic. Amilya employs the Girl in her novel, while the Girl takes Amilya to fill a void in her life.

Abha Daweswar's *Babyji* is a Bildungsroman, i.e. a novel of growth by American based Indian writer Abha Dawesar, where Dawesar's girl protagonist makes a deep and intimate relationship with a lower-caste woman; heterosexuality is dismantled through lesbianism. Anamika Sharma the teenage protagonist is a young girl of sixteen who comes in contact with three women and enjoys her lesbian relationship with them belonging to different age, groups and social strata in quick succession. A grim and serious attack on patriarchal value structure, male domination and India's hard and rigid social structure are successfully woven into the matrix of this well celebrated lesbian novel.

We have a common thread of lesbianism running through the novels of Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Rita Garg, Anita Nair and Abha Daweswar. Their female characters are not submissive to injustices

imposed on them by male dominated value structure. Shobha De's Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights*, Minx in *Strange Obsession*, Surekha in *Snapshots*, Anita Nair's Marikolanthu in *Ladies Coupe*, Manju Kapur's Astha in *A Married Woman*, Rita Garg's the Girl in *Precursor of Love* and Abha Daweswar's Anamika in *Babyji* are new rebellious women who want an equal footing with man instead of being flown along the current of male dominated value-structure. In a male dominated value-structure, familial and societal maladjustments lead women to inner fragmentation thereby forcing them to adopt lesbianism in order to seek emotional outlets. Lesbianism establishes female autonomy over male dominated value-structure. It opens a new vista to women giving a lesson of how to struggle against male domination. What Linda and Aasha Rani, Minx and Amrita, Surekha and Dolly, Marikolanthu and Sujata Akka, Astha and Pipeelika, Amilya and the Girl, Anamika and her female lesbian partners share are manifestations of the new woman who seeks fulfillment within her own sex. They present the truthful picture of the new reality which is going to be born soon after the ultimate overthrow of age-old value-structure.

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