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## **Studying Krishna Sobti as a Feminist Writer: In Light of Her Select Novels**

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## ABSTRACT

Krishna Sobti is renowned for her strong will and fighting spirit, but also for her work in the literary world. She's an unparalleled writer who never ceases to innovate. At a time when no one in the Hindi literary world had heard of feminism, she wrote two short novels "Daar se Bichhudi" and "Mitro Marjani" – later translated as "Memory's Daughter" and "To Hell with You Mitro" respectively and illustrated the quest for a woman's identity in an innovative manner. Sobti has presented women in her novels who are restricted by rituals and customs how they suffer after the death of husbands. The main characters like 'Pasho', 'Mitro', 'Jaya', 'Rati' have faced orthodox rules of society. Krishna's heroine also opposes the traditional moral values imposed on women. She asserts that the tradition-bound, male-dominated system leaves no space for women's individuality. The present paper is an attempt to review Sobti's select novels from a feminist perspective.

**Key Words: Feminism, Indian Feminism, Orthodox Society, Patriarchy, Tradition**

## Introduction

Feminism developed in India as a part of the colonisation of India. This is not to say India did not have a history of subjugating females prior to the arrival of British. The research shows that Indian women experienced "feminist" urges, and also articulated both their sense of exclusion and denial as well as their desire for freedom and fulfilment. Nevertheless, the specific concept of Feminism, as a concept that depends upon the principle of universal and equal citizen rights (without regards to gender and creed), is certainly located in a modern context. Similarly, the British nineteenth century idea of the need to educate women for national progress also presents a historically specific, modern formulation that continues to influence contemporary Indian feminism.

While English has become a household language over the last several decades, Hindi literature has



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continued to grow and the Indian language literature continues to be enriched. Krishna Sobti has enriched Hindi literature by creating rich and strong characters, and experimenting in new styles of writing. Born in the Gujarat province of Pakistan, his writings demonstrate the influence of Akkadian, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. One of the most celebrated and celebrated Indian women writers, Sobti is known for exploring a variety of themes in her work including Indo-Pak partition, relationships between man and woman, changing dynamics of Indian society and the decaying human values. She is one of the few Hindi women writers who has made explorations beyond the themes of female identity and sexuality. Her famous novel, *Mitro Marjani*, details the sexual adventures of a married woman. In her latest novel, *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*, the author explores the complexity and intensity of a woman's traumatic life experiences stemming from a brutal rape. She is also the author of *Zindaginama*, *Daar Se Bichhudi*, and *Badalom ke Ghare*. The writer was awarded the Jnanpith Award in 2017 and also wrote a memoir on her life growing up in Gujarat and India.

### Feminism in Krishna Sobti's Novels

Her first novel, *Daar Se Bichhudi* (Smita Bharti and Meenakshi Bharadwaj, translated as *Memory's Daughter*), was published in 1958. In the 1950s, Hindi novels were either dominated by the sort of urban realism practised by Rajendra Yadav and Kamleshwar (who were at the forefront of the *Nayi Kahani* or *New Story* movement), or by Phanishwarnath Renu's famous 'aanchalik' (provincial lyric) novel. Sobti's novel emerged from this fertile mix as a unique, amalgamative voice.

*Mitro Marjani* or *To Hell With You Mitro* is about the traditional Gurudas family's middle daughter-in-law, Sumitravanti (aka Mitro), who is unapologetic about her sexuality. Sobti introduces three very distinct daughters-in-law in this storey. The first is the daughter-in-ideal law's submissive, the second a rebel, and the third is disinterested in being part of the family. In her quest to fulfil her sexual desires that are not fulfilled by her husband, the novel follows Mitro. Mitro is unconventional because she talks about things, such as sex, that a woman from a respectable Indian family would not candidly talk about. Although



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the other family members see Mitro in a villainous light at the beginning, readers are also presented with a side to her that is warm and caring.

Sardarilal, Mitro's husband, severely reprimands her for unflinchingly looking at him, but 'Mitro stood her ground facing him, unblinkable big brown eyes.' Despite the request of her mother-in-law to stand down, Mitro does not listen, or lower or cover her head in respect, even when there are other male family members present, which also infuriates them. For her "wanton ways," Mitro is punished and insulted as being a "shameless hussy" and "whore of whores!", just because she revels in her sexuality and asks for her husband's satisfaction.

A single mother, who was a famous courtesan, raised Mitro, whom her traditional in-laws somehow ignored before choosing Mitro for their son. Since childhood, she has been exposed to society's hypocrisies about women's sexuality. It is an established fact, by many male writers themselves, that in an orthodox society such as this one, a prostitute is both the most objective and the freest woman. In her intensity and passion for a man, and in her pursuit of them, Balo is also one such woman, 'masculine' along with a 'hard-headed' entrepreneurial mind. But in a traditional family like that of Mitro's, such a direct approach, devoid of any outside layers of feminine subversion and passivity, is severely punishable. Traditionally, a woman must both be constantly available (to fulfil the need of a man) according to patriarchal standards, and yet be the most invisible member-or, a meek slave to the man.

Thus, Sobti in *To Hell With You Mitro* exposes that 'patriarchy in the garb of "culture" tends to contain the so-called "natural", "biological", "overflowing", "turbulent" female sexuality for etching out class, caste, and communal boundaries.' Mitro is subversive primarily because, through her defiant language riddled with sexual innuendos, and her celebration of her sexuality and body, and in spite of repression in the form of insults and beatings, she manages to control her sexuality and its direction.



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*She refuses to channelize her bodily desires into patriarchal value ... and refuses to turn herself into an ideal abstraction, a virtual shadow of patriarchal will.* She rejects the label of a whore (as technically, she is not unfaithful), but also that of the submissive wife devoid of desires. Thus, she opens up a third space wherein desire, freedom of sexuality, love, and respect and acceptance, can co-exist – a space that is granted only to men. However, Mitro does not challenge the structure of the family at any juncture – she only wants to add this space into the family system. In this sense, Sobti is realistic in her understanding of a character like Mitro, and of her aim regarding her novel. (Nikhta 5)

So, that way the family's reputation and standing in the community would not be destroyed, Mitro was sent back to her mother, Balo. Balo's haveli, wherein in her youth she entertained her lovers, but in her old age lives alone. Here, Mitro is presented with options from which to choose. Balo, understanding of her needs, grants her a night with her gardener.



Secondly, it explains that gender is not an immutable trait, and argues that women can act like men. Mitro and Balo are not "feminine", but "masculine" since they are strong-headed, and assertive agents of their own lives and sexuality – they do not acquiesce – and such is their natural form, independent of their gender or sex. This analyses gender as a performative structure. Adults who grew up without a male authoritative figure, turned out to be independent and true to themselves.

*Ai Ladkee* was translated into English under the title Listen Girl by Shivnath. It is a conversation between a daughter and her mother as she is about to die, the mother tells her the story. During the long period of her mother's illness, she repeatedly used the expression 'Hey, girl!' as if distancing herself from the dying before they die. In the following excerpt in her foreword, Sobti writes (in English) about her feelings just a few days after her mother's funeral and explains how she was prompted into writing *Ai Laṛkī* after



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visiting a Sikh place of worship:

I spotted a high yellow flag fluttering in the air, a gurudwara, a shrine of my mother's faith. I decided to go in. A turbaned priest was reciting verses from the Adi Granth, the scripture of my mother's faith. I quietly sat in a corner; my eyes closed. When I at last opened them, it felt as if I had had a final message from my mother.... My death is not the end of the world for you. Little did I know this was something I could not shake off easily. I was bound so intensely to that past that I just had to touch it again. Me, my mother's daughter. And she her daughter's mother. (On Writing Ai Ladki 10)

Listen Girl opens with Ammi complaining about the darkness of her daughter's room and learning later that the lights are actually on. Whooping cough vaccines have shrivelled Ammi's body and fossilised her head. The sore has left her in pain like she was sitting on a bed of arrows. Ammi feels she is an experimental object overstaying her visit on Earth, especially to Susan, the home nurse ticking items off a patient duty chart and the doctor who drills with injections and needles. The sleeping pills weave together shadows of her past memories. Often, she recounts her life journey; from the time she first learned to care for her younger sister, to the time she got married and had her own children. Ammi spends most of her time either conversing with her daughter, eating and drinking, or engaging in household chores. Ammi worries that her unmarried daughter will not have a family of her own like her siblings do.

She is fiercely critical of her daughter's existence, equating her with a vegetable, a lonely shard of straw. She repeatedly stresses the need for her to have a family and a baby. **The body dies, not the soul. Water dries, but not blood. It flows in one's children, and in their children**" she says, or, **"Ladki, a pitcher full of water is better than a vast desert.** (Listen Girl 47)



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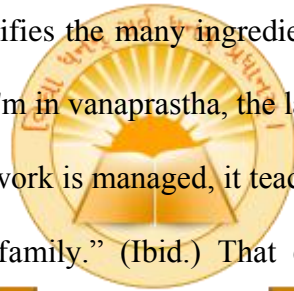
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It is a sign of a parent to be able to hold two differing views with equal ease, and in typical fashion, Grandma also admires her granddaughter's life outside the typical life of a husband and children. She is most pleased that her daughter has the opportunity to do something enjoyable which she could not do during her busy schedule of family activities.

The Ammi whom we meet in Listen Girl is a tempestuous and feisty woman who is bedridden and entirely dependent on others. Her transition into adulthood causes her to be moody, frustrated, and cynical. The breadth of emotions captured perfectly by Sobti's writing, and a similarly reliable translation by her husband. The lively bits when Ammi talks of nature, the beauty of dawn and her morning addiction to tea, her witty remarks and astute observations raise the reading experience.

When her daughter correctly identifies the many ingredients added to her glass of milk from inside her room, the mother proudly exclaims, "I'm in vanaprastha, the last stage of a man's life." (68) Feet turn and ears listen. Her lessons like "When housework is managed, it teaches one the virtue of measure" and "Hands acquire habits only when they have a family." (Ibid.) That exquisite balance comes naturally and is something that is appreciated.



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Her wry humour is at its best when she tells her doctor - **Leave me with something so that I am able to pay my toll tax, don't want to be stranded at the check post itself** or her goodbye. **Earn well, stretch out the lives of your patients.** (88)

With her daughter, Ammi is extremely temperamental and sarcastic when talking about her single status and also shares cigarettes and lemonade with her daughter. The feverish pitch of her final speech gets sharper as she gets near her end.

At the beginning of Listen Girl, Ammi heavily incriminates her daughter for staying single before she mellows down to requesting her to find someone she desires and further adding that she shouldn't keep



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herself confined to her home and hearth and just make a pile of chapatis. The paradox in this conversation can become irritating to the reader. Her constant bickering about where she is getting her accomplishments from, makes the recipient angry. Ammi claims hers was a marriage between equals and she was happy to have moved into a home which saw no differences between the males and females. Despite this, her saying “A true woman must be able to control her husband's mother” sounds violent. While she waits for her son to visit her, she claims that sons always love their mothers but hide it from their wives to placate them, or something along those lines. A conversational exchange in which both parties are involved equally is a healthy one. In Listen, Girl, the daughter's responses range from silence to short, verbalised answers to long monosyllabic answers. Ammi's character could have been more gracious in handing out information.

### Conclusion

Thus, Krishna Sobti's female characters revolt against traditional values of life, which is the first phase of empowering women. Rebellion against inhuman atrocities has been an imbalance of power between men and women for years and this subject imbalance has also been justified in the name of caste, religion, tradition or natural or divine rules in Indian culture and in the guise of these sordid rules created by them, men can prove themselves superior in the name of their masculinity. Women have been tortured in various ways. Rich male egotists with sarcastic views have proved the woman worthy of exploitation through various arguments. The way that men view themselves as better than other men is due to social influences. Indian society refers to the males only. That includes gifts offered to men only. Ever since women became aware of self-realization, the male dominated society started to understand this attitude and expressed anger towards it.





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