

Chapter III

Raunch Culture and Postfeminism in *Starry Nights*

Representations of women in contemporary Indian popular culture frequently centre with ideals of female empowerment. Postfeminism sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation. Such ideas are embodiments of a ubiquitous gendered discourse and the works of Shobha De come under the category of postfeminism. Shobha De portrays the contemporary world enabling women to become their desired selves. These works revolve around consumer culture thus most of the postfeminist works are widely popular or best sellers.

Postfeminism can be placed within the perspective of an increasing sexualisation of the late twentieth- century culture that finds expression in the propagation of discourses about and representation of sex and sexuality across a range of various media forms. 'Raunch culture', is a term coined by American Journalist Levy in the year 2006, and this term refers to the influence sex industry into twenty-first century mainstream literary culture, and the consequential normalization of soft porn style images of the woman's physical appearance. Women are encouraged to objectify their physique proudly and provocatively and embody personas traditionally associated with soft porn in their dress and demeanor. This culture celebrates the commodified female body and promotes its potential for women empowerment.

Raunch Culture on the other hand is a filament of postfeministic ideology. This type of raunch culture is exemplified in postfeministic television programs like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Postfeminism celebrates female agency by means of its discernment that women in contemporary society have been granted the capacity to "have it all" (Brunsdon 98). Raunch culture and postfeminism propagates the

ideologies of women's liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually provocative appearance and behavior as acts to be an aspect of women empowerment. Attwood as well refers to the contemporary postfeminist literature to be "preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts ,...the emergence of new forms of sexual experience"(78).

Popular culture has a tendency to create stories in which men fear their authority would be destructed by these aggressive and powerful women who demand emotional and sexual liberation. These types of women who are well aware of their sexual rights are new to the popular culture because till then women have been represented as timid, always subjugated and as a victim. Women with such string personalities are termed as 'femme fatale' in popular culture. The femme fatale is not passive, and does not merely respond to the needs and desires of men on the contrary, she is usually concerned solely with her own best interests and her own self development.

According to Place, the opposite female archetype of 'femme fatale' is the good girl: "she offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities" (50). Women portrayed in literature in the image of good girl archetype are very passive and static and are usually present to support and nurture the hero, whose ultimate aim is the hero's happiness. The good girl stereotype not just supports one man, eventually she supports patriarchy. Stereotypical women in literature expresses opinion which is strictly in line with prevailing prejudices and assumptions, and her actions can be directed at perpetuating patriarchal values. Society in accordance with literary archetypes has witness such gentle form of women and anyone who goes off this track

are seen as a threat to the established cultural ethos. Shobha De as a writer has chosen to represent women characters in her works who rebel against the passive image of women as established in literature.

The mainstream contemporary literary work portrays women who adopt a rebellious stance as an expression of positive female autonomy rather than objectification of her personality. With regard to examination of gender representations in media, Rosalind Gill argues about the status of contemporary women as follows:

shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification
 ...straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.

(*Gender and the Media* 258)

Gill suggests that the shift from sexual object to desiring sexual subject representation leads to a higher form of exploitation: “a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self policing narcissistic gaze” (*Gender and the Media* 258). The focus on sexuality as a prospect is seen to be representative of a neo-liberal society that constructs individuals as self-determining and free.

Shobha De’s novels can be placed within the tenets of raunch culture which coincides in terms with postfeminism. In many obvious and subtle ways, her novel explores the meaning of gender equality especially focusing on sexual egalitarianism. According to the postfeminist ideology, there are no gender differences. If a woman prefers, she can look good, sexy, ambitious, selfish or anything she wants to be and yet remain unrelated to the operations of social power structure and authority.

“Women, if they so chose can work, talk, and have sex like men while still

maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman” (Gerhard 37).

Shobha De in her novels deal with the contemporary issues of postfeminism and also realistically portrays the urban Indian society in accordance with its unique feature of metropolitan culture. Shobha De has deliberately chosen Bombay as the locale for her novels because Bombay is a city of movies, glamour, modeling and it is also the capital of the current popular culture in India. Postfeminist represent women as “enjoying unprecedented economic power and freedom, they are also concurrently constrained by insecurity, obsessed by clothes and self-defined by their relationships with men” (Lewis 29). Thus De’s writing is characteristic of postfeminism.

Shobha De in her novel *Starry Nights* courageously exposes and explores the world around her, a world which is unsatiated with the exploitation of women for acquiring money and power.

She (Shobha De) is bold enough to illumine the real human condition- the way girls think, fantasize and converse with each other when they are alone about tabooed subjects, discusses blatantly the problems, desires and aspirations of career women highlighting in general gender awareness, self-definition, existence and destiny. Most of the women characters depicted by Shobha De are economically independent and socially uninhibited who are conscious of their self-respect because they are competent professionals working shoulder to shoulder with their male counterpart. (Myles 94)

Shobha De portrays the coarse side of glamour and wealth in the Indian upper middle class society without any reticence. Shobha De operates within these frameworks, her

novels and her women characters are competent professionals who are economically independent and who are aware of their self respect.

In the novel *Starry Nights* Shobha De portrays a “highly sexualized version of power feminism, so-called ‘do-me feminism’, that sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation” (Genz 91). The ‘do-me feminism’ is a phrase coined by journalist Tad Friend in an article titled *Feminist Women Who Like Sex* in a magazine titled *Esquire* in the year 1994. Writing explicitly about sex by a woman author was unacceptable norm but the feminists with postfeminist ideologies made these drift an acceptable one.

Naomi Wolf who is an advocate of postfeminism claims that she finds security and solace in the male body, and that “there is an elaborate vocabulary in which to describe sexual harm done by men, but almost no vocabulary in which a woman can celebrate sex with men” (92). By all means Shobha De’s writing can be declared as postfeminist in nature because she writes in detail about sex in her novels. The ‘do-me feminism’ encourages women to talk explicitly about sex and it is acceptable if a woman has multiple sexual partner. The hidden cue is an indirect questioning on patriarchy which allows men to have multiple partners that brings in no objection or the society never looks at such men with disgust. Postfeminism normalizes the topic of sex without generalizing gender specific preferences.

Starry Nights is the story of Aasha Rani who belongs to the world of glamorous glittering world of cinema which attracts thousands of ambitious young girls who want name, fame and wealth instantly. The novel spins around the story of how young girls reach their goals and become victims of sexual exploitation. *Starry Nights* offers the most dismal picture of women exploitation closely associated with

Bollywood. Geeta Barua in her article, 'Rise and Fall of a Star: A Study of *Starry Nights*' comments:

The novel is also a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, glamour, crimes, lies, and deceits and sexual exploitation. Since Shobha De the novelist has been long associated with the Bombay film world as a journalist she knows it first hand and has been able to portray it well. (174)

Starry Nights is a novel which revolves around the Indian film industry. Aasha Rani, the protagonist of the novel is introduced into the film world in her early teens by her ambitious mother with the help of Kishenbhai, a film producer. Initially she gets a chance to act only in a porn film. Sonia Ningthoujam explores the exploitation of women in the glamour world thus:

It is not only Aasha Rani but a good number of other heroines who have made a place for themselves using their body as the main bait to get what they aspire for. Women in the glamour world are, in traditional parlance, characterless with no consideration for traditional morality which, in fact, is called into question. Knowing well this fact, the new generation of ambitious women is ready to make every compromise as long as they can get riches and fame. (43)

Kishenbhai exploits Aasha Rani sexually and her mother does not protect Aasha. She is subtly forced into the industry by her mother. Kishenbhai insists on Aasha going to various parties to meet important people. After each party Kishenbhai advises her to go to the room of various financiers, politicians and many other rich people of the city for that night to sleep with them. Most of the times, she does not even bother to look at the man's face or body. Nisha Trivedi observes: "The glittering

world of cinema is in reality so ruthless, so miserable that it can shatter the moral values and innocence of any human being. But Aasha survives and achieves success” (186). Aasha Rani is actually a victim of child abuse.

As her career progress in the trajectory of stardom Aasha gains confidence. Aasha Rani makes contacts with most influential person of the city especially Sheth Amirchand. Shethji promises her two more films and thus with the help of such a powerful alliance Aasha Rani makes a stable place in the industry. This is the first step of revenge taken by Aasha on the people who wronged her. Attaining success in the same industry after so much of abuse, exploitation and failure is a difficult task and it cannot be attained by a weak woman who sits and broods on her fate and chooses to remain in a victim position.

Aasha Rani falls in love with the top hero of that time Akshay. But faces failure in this personal relationship which shatters her emotionally and becomes more rigid. Akshay actually uses Aasha Rani to boost up his career. At times debutant heroes depend upon top heroines to flourish and consolidate their career. Akshay realizes that he has to act with Aasha in order to have a successful career. Their first film goes on to break box-office records which attracts many producers and directors to invest on them. Working together, they spend all their time in each other’s company. And Aasha Rani begins to fall in love with him and Akshay takes advantage of this opportunity. However Akshay’s wife Mrs. Malini Arora suspects some miscreant activities between Aasha and her husband. Malini is aware that Akshay choose her to be his wife after much deliberation as he wants only a home maker and a good mother to his children.

What prompts Akshay to want his wife to be a ‘home-maker’ is that children would be affected if both husband and wife have careers. He

has seen personally how some women go to the extent of doing anything for a flourishing career.... He is wrong because he has not been able to see the positive characters of a career woman which could have evoked respect for such women in him. (Manohar 131)

Malini who is associated with lots of NGOs and other social activities is kept away from her husband's share of fame. Akshay does not like her to attend his new film release functions because he is superstitious and believes his film will flop, if she witnesses the premiere shot. Malini realises that Aasha Rani's relationship with her husband is becoming serious. The confrontation takes place a few months after Malini questions Akshay. Feeling insecure and depressed at his reply Malini decides to take up Rita's help and support because Rita is the wife of a powerful businessman. Rita assures her not to worry about her husband's *philanderations*. Rita asks Aasha not to disturb the married life of Malini. Aasha tells her that she is not the one who is the cause for breaking up Malini's marriage. Then Malini speaks up with rage: "Look here, you bloody kutti, we all know your types-stealing our men, wrecking our homes" (SN 49). Malini curses Aasha bitterly that she will regret it one day. Sandhya Rani Dash states: "Shobha De moved far away from depicting characters in the tradition of Indian woman. She stepped out of the threshold of family and tradition to portray the harsh realities that await a woman outside the four walls of her house" (167).

After the intervention of Rita , Akshay begins to show indifference to Aasha Rani. Aasha Rani becomes depressed and resorts to alcoholism. One day she decides to go uninvited to the inauguration party of Akshay's new film uninvited. Akshay becomes furious after seeing Aasha there and orders her to get out of the party. He

strikes her with his shoes and Malini also joins him. No one present in the party hall comes to rescue her.

Seth Amirchand, a Member of Parliament is a man who has powerful influence on bollywood as he is said to have links with the underworld dons. His wife and children live in a remote village in Kutch whereas he lives in Worli, Bombay with Lubna, a Muslim Mistress who was a former bar dancer. Kishenbhai has links with Seth and he occasionally supplies young woman to him in return of financial and other favours. "The constant reiteration in it of physical couplings may be in keeping with the public secret of Bollywood's casting couch" (Sen 24).

In order to revive her fame, Aasha Rani decides to use Seth Amirchand. She is most flattered when summons from Amirchand's office arrives. Amma becomes very excited and rushes to break the news to Kishenbhai. But Kishenbhai expresses his disapproval instantly and becomes upset after hearing the request of Seth. He is also certain that Aasha Rani will make the most of from this opportunity. In spite of objection and disapproval from Kishenbhai, Aasha Rani decides to go and meet Seth in person. At Amirchand's office, she is asked to wait in a small, air-conditioned room. After fifteen minutes, a person comes to conduct a medical check-up to prepare her for Sethji. Then she thinks about her blue film days and smiles ironically at the memory. It must have been around five in the morning when she wakes up wondering where she is. She notices an envelope lying on the bed with a large amount of currency notes in it. On the very next day Sethji persuades Nitesh, a top director and producer to make Aasha Rani to play the leading role in his latest movie, 'Tarazu'. Aasha Rani's career swings into the fastest track in filmdom with that film.

Overnight, Aasha Rani's remuneration rises to eight lacks for a film and offers pour in followed by three swift hits. Seth Amirchand generously and lavishly spends

money on Aasha Rani. He is munificent with Aasha Rani by giving her many gifts of which one gift is a deluxe air-conditioned make-up van. He arranges a trip to Dubai which is just the diversion Aasha Rani needs to forget Akshay. A famous Bombay based don who lives in Dubai is called as 'Badshah', who is in the most wanted list of more than five countries around the world for murder and smuggling, receives her in Dubai. His hospitality is bountiful, but he does not indulge with her for sexual gratification. When she returns to Bombay a fortnight later, she recuperates from her break up with Akshay.

The speckled lives of parents have a great impact on children. One day, Aasha Rani enquires about her father to her amma after accidentally coming across few old family albums from the back of her cupboard. She flips through old sepia-coloured photographs of the family in which amma looks beautiful. But after a few years of marriage, amma starts putting on weight. They were not staying together then, for he already had his own family and Girija was his wife. Amma tells her that her appa is a real movie bigwig and owns a big studio in Madras. When her father loses interest on her mother, he cuts off all money and so Aasha Rani's mother along with her two daughters is forced to move out of the bungalow to some ugly little place in a filthy area. Aasha Rani remembers a succession of dubious 'mamas' (uncles) turning up at their place in the evenings and taking her mother out on mysterious missions. She comes back in the late night looking sleepy.

Shobha De maintains that sex is in the centre. So do her critics.

Contrary to their opinions, my finding is that 'Revenge' is in the centre of her novels; 'Sex' is only the convenient medium in their hands.

Aasha and her mother in the past had faced several problems-natural as well as men-made. Now they take revenge against men. (Khatri 139)

Aasha Rani and her mother are true examples of 'femme fatal' by all means. They avenge the world which abused them. They use the abusers weapon that is sex as their tool for the mission, as their mission is nothing but survival.

Aasha Rani is interviewed by Linda for the famous 'Showbiz' magazine. Linda who had been a film journalist for seven years is extremely witty and clever. Aasha Rani is appallingly impressed by Linda's unfussy smartness. Linda declares: "You are so young. So beautiful and so successful. Had I been a man I would have wanted to marry you" (SN 75). As the interview progresses Linda tells stories about the interviews with Akshay and other actors of the film industries. It is through these stories that Aasha Rani knows more and more about the industry.

It was bitterly cold weather when Aasha Rani and Linda reaches Manali. Finding the right opportunity Linda suddenly holds Aasha Rani without her consent and hugs her close and kisses her saying: "You are a real iceberg, yaar" (SN 78). There is no resistance left any more for Aasha. Aasha Rani's entire body is floating and mind is adrift. Then Linda says: "I've been dying for you all these months. And you are mine at last" (SN 80). Aasha Rani thus encounters lesbisan relationship through Linda.

An off shoot notion of postfeminism is termed as Girl Power which "is a re-appraisal of femininity ...as a means of female empowerment and agency" (Genz 76). Writing a piece of art which celebrates sexuality of women in popular culture is called as 'chick lit'. Chick lit is women centred fiction or any piece of literary work that rejoices the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual and homosexual romances involving women.

Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring

images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life.

(Ferriss 9)

Girl Power is a complex discourse that provides a new definition to the articulation of femininity and represents “a feminist ideal of a new, robust, young woman with agency and a strong sense of self” (Aapola 39). In *Starry Nights* Aasha Rani uses sex as a tool to avenge the world and sex is also discussed by her as a means of solace and entertainment. Shobha De’s women are fashionable, independent and also use sex as a power to avenge the people who exploited them.

Girl Power discards the notions that feminism is necessarily anti-feminine and anti-popular.

Girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don’t want to be sexually exploited, they don’t want to be sexual; against the necessity of brass-buttoned, red-suited seriousness to infiltrate a man’s world; against the anachronistic belief that...girls and power don’t mix.

(Baumgardner 137)

Aasha Rani was sexually abused in her early teenage and throughout her life, but that doesn’t stop her being sexual and powerful.

Aasha Rani is secretly thrilled when she bags the role of Emma in the movie titled “Bechari Begum” an Indian version of *Madam Bovary*. Amma writes a letter very angrily from Madras ordering Aasha not to accept that film offer even though it may win the award. Shethji warns her to be careful with Suhas who is the Director of the film but Aasha Rani likes the charming Suhas. He assures her that she would be reborn with that film. When she demands for special treatment in the sets, he refuses bitterly. What really puzzles her though is his choice of her as his heroine. Suhas is a

true professional and focuses only on Aasha Rani's acting skill. He does not attempt to use her by any means.

Aasha Rani's earthy new look publicity photographs are printed on the covers of all magazines along with gushing write ups along with those sexy and stunning pictures. Aasha Rani drapes her favourite white and becomes the centre of attraction at the premiere of "Bechari Begum" premiere. Aasha Rani quickly scans the audience to catch a glimpse of Akshay but her attempt was in vain. But Aasha Rani meets Abhijit Mehra who is the son of a powerful industrialist named Amrish Mehra. The night, Aasha Rani meets Abhijit, who is the chief sponsor of the show. On seeing Aasha Rani, he summons one of the organizers and tells him that he is interested in meeting her. While garlanding Abhijit at the show, she experiences a secret thrill as her fingers brush past his ears. He holds her hands in his, leans over and kisses her warmly on both cheeks to uproarious applause on stage. He passes a business card to her and ask her to call him later. It is a fixture in the elite circles where the affluent men seek the company of star heroines to fulfil their carnal pleasures.

Aasha Rani meets Abhijit by pure coincidence in a jewellery shop in Zaveri Bazar. Abhijit was accompanied by his fiancé, Nikita. Nikita invites Aasha to come to her wedding. Abhijit in a secret meeting tells Aasha Rani that he might be getting married to Nikita but he is not in love with her and wants Aasha Rani desperately. One day Abhijit makes a visit to Aasha Rani's house. they spend that night indulging in sexual pleasures.

The news of Abhijit and Nikita's marriage is published on the front page of every newspaper on that particular day. There are times Aasha Rani wants nothing more desperately other than love, care and affection. But somewhere along the line, she realises that even Abhijit is exploiting her. She tells him: "My life is beginning

to resemble the movies I act in. You are like Devdas, and I, Chandramukhi” (SN 97). She also suggests him that he should go back to his wife and make a man of himself but Abhijit does not want to leave her. “The novel successfully portrays the testosterone-excited world of Bombay high society describing the exploits of people in power and respectable husbands who cheat on their wives and leave them sulking in home helplessly” (Vats 65). Aasha Rani becomes disillusioned and depressed after this incident. She loses interest to act in films in this desperate and emotionally vulnerable condition and contemplates on fleeing to Madras.

At this point in her life Aasha Rani meets Akshay on a rainy day. Aasha Rani just opens the car door and gets in without being invited by him. Before Akshay knows what is happening she gets in beside him. Immediately, he tells her to get out of the car. In desperation, she bends and touches his feet as an act of honour. Akshay looks into her eyes and something about her expression makes him change his mind. Both of them know that the affair is on once more. She cancels her shootings and spends every moment with Akshay in secrecy. But Aasha Rani’s producers are not all that sympathetic and she begins receiving warning calls from them for her unannounced absentia. Fortunately her next two films are massive box-office hits.

Amma was away from Bombay to take care of Aasha Rani’s father who was seriously ill and abandoned in Madras. Amma was happy that Aasha Rani’s career is back on track so she decides to come back and take charge of her daughter’s career and life once again. Aasha Rani is rather glad to see amma, when she arrives unannounced from Madras. It is quite unfortunate that her mother is only after her money.

Amirchand is not happy with the developments either and so he sends for Aasha Rani after nearly three months. She knows what the meeting is for. Before he can say

anything, she falls at his feet in an act of asking apology. Shethji looks at her skeptically saying that all women are just the same, who have ruined their life by leaving the stage at the peak of the career. She tells him that she is not going to sign any more film either. The news that Aasha Rani is quitting films spread quickly. She gets call from media personals as well including Linda. Amma was not told about the plans. She is furious about Aasha's plans to quit films.

The fantasy world of heroines is shattered when their dreams do not conform to reality. Aasha Rani believes that Akshay would leave his family in order to marry her. Akshay is not convinced about divorcing his wife and marrying Aasha Rani. Aasha Rani tells that they will become Muslims as the laws in Islam allow bigamy. Akshay refuses her idea saying that he wants to die a Hindu, after hearing this she curses him and collapses on the bed.

Aasha Rani somehow manages to reach her house and there she takes sleeping pills to commit suicide and locks herself inside the room and collapses. When amma finally gets the watchman to break open the door, she finds Aasha Rani stretched across the bed with a bottle of empty sleeping tablets in hand. Immediately, amma phones Kishenbhai and they secretly take her to the hospital. But the news leaks somehow and Aasha Rani's suicide attempt screams the head line in all the newspapers. Linda's byline is prominently displayed. Linda quotes Aasha Rani on topics of her decision to quit, to marry Akshay and to have baby. It is a blow to her filmy career and Kishanbhai and Amma stare at the paper in disbelief.

Aasha Rani takes two days to come out of coma and enquires about Akshay. It is only a fortnight later that Aasha Rani is able to read Linda's disdainful article on her. Akshay's role in her suicide attempt is boldly published. Akshay and Aasha Rani are dubbed by the public as modern-day Salim and Anarkali. Akshay remains tight-

lipped and refuses to give his version of the story to the media. But Aasha Rani's suicide makes Akshay popular and he begins to get more film offers. She makes him a hero once more. Amma advises Aasha not to wait for Akshay. But the memory of Akshay haunts her day and night. For his part, Akshay leaves decision making to his friend and adviser Ajay who suggests him to forget Aasha Rani.

Many men try to exploit the situation of Aasha Rani when she is in such a frail condition. Aasha Rani's health picks up gradually but she becomes more reticent. Kishenbhai advises amma to leave Aasha Rani alone. Within ten days, Amma pushes Aasha Rani back into the studios. Abhijit rushes to Aasha Rani's home on hearing the news about the suicide but the security at the gate refuses to let him in. Kishenbhai gives an early hit to Aasha Rani's mother about her daughter's relationship with Abhijit. Abhijit finally is caught up with Aasha Rani at the Film City Studio, where she is playing Sita to Tushar's Ram. She asks him to meet her in a couple of hours. Abhijit takes Aasha Rani's mind off Akshay. He insists on her having a drink with him when she gets to his suite. In a state of depression and loneliness Aasha Rani makes a mistake of eloping with Abhijit to New Zealand.

Amrishbhai, Abhijit's father catches them at Auckland Airport when Abhijit and Aasha Rani land there. Amrishbhai ignores Aasha Rani completely but he greets his son affectionately. Abhijit walks into their suite six hours later and tells Aasha Rani in a broken voice: "Dad wants you to stay here as long as you want. He has left instructions that all your bills be settled. He has also left you money for shopping and travelling" (SN 124). She feels intensely sorry for the pathetic, scared man standing in front of her. Aasha Rani accepts his proposal and spends ten days shopping alone in Wellington, New Zealand.

Aasha meets a local resident of New Zealand named Jamie (Jay) Philips on her sixth day in Wellington. It is a Friday night; Jay tells her his story at a little garden restaurant. He has an old Indian connection; his grandfather was an Army General in India. Jay amazes Aasha Rani with his knowledge of films and film-stars. When Jay proposes to marry her, she is shocked. When asked by Aasha about his past girl friends, he tells that she is the only woman who shares love with him and then her eyes are drenched with tears. Aasha Rani accepts his proposal and marries him. Later, Jay proves to be a passionate husband. Aasha Rani feels relaxed and secured in his care. Sasha is born on a beautiful spring morning. He tells her to go back to India but she refuses as she wants to protect Sasha from Amma.

Sasha grows up into an extraordinarily pretty child. Jay persuades his wife, Aasha again and again to go back to India. At last, she agrees to his proposal saying that they will be in India in time for Holi festival. Aasha Rani lands in India along with her husband and daughter. The nostalgia of Aasha Rani about her home town rejuvenates her life. Aasha Rani feels relaxed as she steps out of Bombay Airport. She is amazed that public still recognise her. Then a fan of Aasha reveals how gossips were created by the magazine –‘Showbiz’, that Aasha is dead by committing suicide. When they go back to the hotel, there are two messages for them. One is from the local T.V. Channel and the other from Akshay. Aasha Rani’s hands tremble as she picks up the receiver. It is Akshay, who tells her that he is dying. When Jay tells her that Akshay is suffering from cancer, she wants to meet him the next day. Aasha Rani thinks Akshay is virtually unrecognizable as if he were a ghost. She leans low over Akshay and kisses his forehead.

Aasha Rani comes to know that Amma has made Sudha, Aasha Rani’s sister a successful heroine in the film industry. Aasha Rani hesitates to phone her Amma. It is

Jay who insists her to meet Amma as Sasha ought to know her grandma and other relatives. Aasha Rani does not have to make the first move. Aasha Rani rejects all the communication that comes to her from her mother's side, including Kishenbhai, eventually rejecting all the phone calls made by Amma or Kishenbhai. The entire film fraternity, her admirers and public in general are shocked as well as disheartened to know that their favourite heroine is married. Amma becomes furious because she cannot live without Aasha's company. She becomes very angry. Amma lashes out at her daughter for providing intimate details of her life and listing out all her affairs to the media. The first thing Amma does is to inform Shethji about Aasha's comeback. He assures her not to be disappointed in any case as Aasha Rani is dead to them. Then Amma decides to put Sudha into the hands of Sheth Amirchand.

Sudha is sent to Shethji's house with Kishenbhai. It seems unavoidable for Sudha to take up the roles relinquished by Aasha Rani. Kishenbhai intervenes as he has experiences in making Aasha a big star. He assures Amma that Sudha will turn out to be a greater film star than her sister Aasha. Sudha is initially nervous about stepping into her sister's shoes. Then Amma tells her: "You have everything in your favour-age, looks talent. Make the most of them. Don't throw your career away like your stupid sister did" (SN 147).

Aasha Rani decides to meet Amma and goes to her house. Leaving aside the grudge that she had, Amma welcomes Aasha Rani warmly. She greets her daughter and son-in-law with a traditional 'Aarti' (light) to welcome them home. Aasha Rani stares at her mother's face to ascertain if she is the same woman who had viviously forced her into the glamorous world. Amma tells her that it would make her Appa happy to see her and Sasha. But Aasha Rani says that she has to think about it. Sudha's financial affairs are handled by a banker friend of hers. She lives with Amar in a

grand bungalow at Vile Parle. She used to give fixed money for Amma. He requests Aasha to come back to films, if she wants to. But Aasha Rani refuses his proposal as she is happy with her domestic life. She finally declares that she is very happy in New Zealand.

Jay tells his wife that if she decides to renew her acting career there would be no objection from his side. Amma becomes impressed by hearing that Jay has given her the permission to act because if Aasha had married an Indian man definitely he would not have allowed to make take up acting as a career after marriage. In Amma's opinion, Sudha is hard-hearted and vicious. Whereas Aasha Rani has a soft heart, and is kind and good to people who have done so much for her. On that very day Amma insists as well as convinces Aasha that she should announce her come back by arranging a grand party by inviting all the influential people of the film industry. Ten minutes after that conversation, the phone rings and Aasha Rani picks up the extension. With a slight shock, she recognizes Linda's voice talking to Amma about her come back. Then she tells Kishenbhai not to make any moves on her behalf, as she would let him know of her decision in a couple of days. Amma and Kishnebhai stare dumbly at her.

Jay begins to get restless and bored. He inquires Aasha Rani when are they going to Madras to meet her Appa. Aasha informs Sasha that they are going to meet her grandfather who was living in Madras. Sasha looks very excited because she does not know that she has a grandpa in Madras. Aasha Rani pats her head and explains that her father is very old and sick. On the long flight to Madras, Aasha Rani's thoughts are about Sudha. While she is flipping through Linda's magazine, she finds in flattering pictures of herself prominently printed in their much-read gossip column. There is a long interview with Sudha that Linda has written. At one point in the

interview Sudha has proudly claimed that she is a star and her sister Aasha Rani is a nobody now. Sudha claims that her akka should be happy living a retired life as she is married. After she finishes reading the piece, Aasha Rani wonders what had turned Sudha against her.

Amma informs Appa about Aasha Rani's visit. He is confined to a wheel-chair, with nurses attending on him night and day and he is affected by multiple strokes. Aasha Rani is scared about the meeting. She had almost forgotten what her father looks like. Amma takes out one of her old saris from her trunk box and gives it to her saying that her Appa likes yellow colour with a vermilion border. When Amma tells that she has given some of her jewellery to Sudha, Aasha Rani is angry with her. They drive past the famous Marina Beach. Aasha Rani is shocked to see Appa motionless and silent. Appa is extremely content with joy on seeing his daughter. She looks up at his face and there are tears running down his cheeks. Aasha Rani decides to take care of Appa. Her first priority is to get competent nursing staff for Appa

Few months later in a new movie launch party, Aasha Rani encounters Sudha. In the star stud party Sasha feels uncomfortable and began to cry. Then Jay says firmly that Sasha is suddenly exposed to a world she never knows existed and so she may feel uncomfortable. He expresses his opinion that Sasha must go back with him, because he is confident enough to handle Sasha all alone. Aasha Rani feels grateful to him for he has saved her life. Jay tells her that he married Aasha because he finds her sexy and exotic. He also tells if she fails to grab her chance in films then, it will be too late. Aasha Rani feels desperately lonely after Jay and Sasha leave her and then Jay transfers a generous amount of money into her account.

One day, after she finishes her usual frugal lunch, the nurse says that her appa wants to see her. He calls her to come closer and he feels sorry for he has done

nothing to help Aasha. He tells that once he was a busy man running a studio which is now damaged by fire. He borrowed heavily that and lost money investing in the studio. The creditors do not care about his problems. He requests Aasha to see that his studio prospers once again and becomes the pride of the industry. But the glow in his eyes remains as he gazes upon his daughter. The reconciliation of a father with his family is vividly presented here. Aasha Rani returns to her home town Bombay along with her Appa.

A young, smart and well-dressed film producer named Jojo meets Aasha. Jojo Mehta is a foreign return who studied film-making and philosophy from University of California. He offers her the role of mother-in-law but she refuses it. Later, Appa suggests her that she should not accept that offer because there is no importance for her character. She looks fondly at her father and is touched by his concern. She tells him if she does not grab the opportunity, she will always regret for it. He advises her not to trust her sister, Sudha as she is dangerous. Even though Amma accepts to Appa's arrival, Sudha is not overjoyed at having Appa around.

Aasha Rani is emotionally drained as her husband and her daughter leave to New Zealand. The rumour that Jay had a sexual encounter with Sudha shatters her belief in the institution of marriage. She feels betrayed and begins to suspect Jay and she emotionally drifts away from him. In spite of these rumour Aasha Rani tries to extend her friendship and love to her sister, Sudha. Aasha Rani realises that Sudha sees her as her rival in the industry and Sudha is not happy about of Aasha Rani making a comeback to the films. She feels distressed and lonely so she decides to revitalize her old relationships in the film industry with the help of Kishenbhai. She meets Jojo and expresses her wish to meet Abhijit. Kishenbhai warns her not to meet him as Amrishbhai will murder her.

At this point in her life Aasha Rani gets the news about the death of Akshay. She feels her heart thudding fast when Akshay dies at around the sametime that she stands in front of her main altar praying fervently for his life. Watching Akshay's funeral proceedings on the T.V. in her bedroom, she smiles bitterly. Though she is exploited and neglected by him, Aasha cannot withdraw her attachment with him. Aasha Rani feels an emotional vacuum after Akshay's death.

After a fortnight of Akshay's death, the door bell rings in the early hours of the morning at about 3 a.m. Three men walk in and start searching the room, and Aasha Rani is paralyzed with fear. One of them catches her by the hair and drags her off the bed. They tell her that they are sent by Jojo's wife to kill her. They flick a lighter and toss it at her. As soon as they leave Aasha Rani rushes Appa in his wheel chair as Appa is terrified. The two of them have to run out to the deserted street. When she requests some boys to get them to Sea Rock, they help her. She phones Shethji seeking help, but he advises her to go back to her husband and child. She decides at once that she will first fly to Madras and drop Appa in Amma's care and plans a trip to New Zealand to meet her husband.

When Aasha Rani reaches Madras, another bad news hits her that Amma requires medical attention. So in order to take care of her parents Aasha Rani postpones her New Zealand trip. She decides to sell her Bombay house but Shethji advises her not to do so and offers help by giving her money. Aasha Rani gets enough time to contemplate and analyze her marriage. She is honest enough to admit that the time she shares with Jay is far better than with any other man. She trembles in fear at the memories of her past, she recollects all the stages of her life, particularly her experiences when she was an innocent teenager who was forced to act in porn movies and her rise to the stage where she became a star in the film industry.

The novel depicts the struggle of a young woman to make it to this colourful world with all its difficulties and shame. The price of Aasha Rani has to pay to become the number one heroine is awe-inspiring. De's closeness and familiarity with the film world as a journalist might have somewhat facilitated her to portray it in fine detail even though the veracity of the details given may be a matter of her personal observation and opinion. (Ningthoujam 87)

Aasha Rani gathers courage and questions Appa for abandoning her mother along with his two daughters. He tells that men are cruel and there is no equality between men and women.

The men populating the *Starry Nights* have no value for a woman's individuality, dignity, sensitivity and feelings, though they try to maintain a patronizing stance in order to assert their traditional role of power and authority in their respective capacities. At the most, they are capable of showing generosity and sympathy attitude of pity and condescension. (Vats 77)

Aasha Rani undergoes psychological conflict in maintaining relationships with her kith and kin and others. It is true that men in power are exploiting women in various ways; but women never become enervated and try to assert their selves as successful individuals in the patriarchal society. Reluctantly, she books her flight back to New Zealand. Then she calls Kishenbhai and asks him to keep an eye on her house while she is away. She purchases many gifts for Sasha.

Aasha Rani dislikes travelling alone in aeroplane. And she is nervous on coming back home after so many days. It is the stewardess who tells that the gentleman in row four sends her the glass of wine. When she turns around to look at him, he introduces

himself as Gopalakrishnan, an old friend of her father. The stranger does most of the talk asking about her life. She takes wine when he offers her. Aasha Rani feels his company in the lonely long duration flight journey has warded off her loneliness. Gopalakrishnan who is of her father's age takes advantage of her vulnerable situation and touches her in a sexual manner and continues massaging her body as she relaxes. Aasha Rani takes his advances as a medicine to forget her stress and depression. As the flight lands at New Zealand airport, Gopalakrishnan handed her his business card. Aasha Rani becomes too shocked to respond.

The homecoming of Aasha Rani is more pleasant than expected. Jay and Sasha express their delight after seeing her. Jay arranges a party for her with a few people, where Sasha does not want Aasha Rani to wear a sari for the party so she wears jeans. In the mean time, Aasha Rani notices that Sasha is very much attached to her nanny, Alice. Later on Jay reveals the truth that he has an affair with Alice and he is happy with her. Aasha Rani is shattered by the news. However Jay says that he would continue to be in touch with Aasha Rani and will be a good friend to her. Aasha Rani becomes emotionally devastated. Ironically, every film she acts in depicts the husband-wife relationship and speaks of this sacred relationship. She does not see a single happy marriage. However she is grateful to God for sparing her atleast for few years to lead a happy martial life and she is happy to have a daughter within the wedlock.

At the party Aasha Rani realises that her father-in-law tries to make sexual advances towards her. He shamelessly leans towards her and passes a lewd comment. Aasha Rani feels angry because most men whom she meets look at her as a subject of sexual desire. Heartbroken Aasha Rani decides not to go to Bombay or Madras and feels that she needs a break. She makes a decision to go to London and stay away

from everything for a while. Aasha Rani stares out of the window as her cab rolls through the deserted streets of London. She cannot tolerate going back to Madras with the problems of Appa and Amma and an empty house in Bombay. She feels defeated and all she wants to do is to run and hide somewhere in an unknown place. Within the first month in London she meets Shonali who is a Thai dancer. Shonali befriends Aasha Rani and takes care of her in London city which is new to Aasha Rani.

One day when Aasha Rani was having tea in a restaurant along with Shonali, a couple of Arabs comes over and says a few soft words in Arabic to Shonali asking her to introduce Aasha Rani to them. When asked by Aasha Rani who they are, Shonali casually tells her that they are her clients. When enquired by Aasha, she tells that she is running a P.R. agency, a world-wide affair. Shonali belongs to the worldwide network of a famous high profile prostitution network. They cater to a lot of VIP's like socialites, movie-stars, etc. Aasha Rani does not quite know what to make of the encounter. Shonali takes Aasha Rani to various evening parties. Soon, Aasha Rani is busy with an endless whirl of parties, country-weekends and small jaunts across the country. Aasha Rani slowly gets into the profession and all her transactions are handled by Shonali.

Shonali is an impatient critic as well as her guide as Aasha Rani plunges into her new life. She respects Shonali's privacy and expected her to respect hers too. Aasha Rani tries to be safe and cautious and does not want to mess with any shady characters, especially after her encounter with the goondas dispatched by Jojo's wife.

To her surprise Aasha Rani meets Gopalakrsihnan in a party organised by Shonali. Aasha Rani understands that he had been following her. Gopalakrsihnan talks to a group of English bankers in a quiet corner of Shonali's living-room on one of their party evenings. The bankers look at Aasha Rani and then back at him. He

introduces her easily as a friend of their hostess, Shonali. Aasha Rani is stunned by the information and she doubts the credibility of Gopalakrishnan.

The next morning there is a knock at Aasha Rani's door, she opens the door, making sure the safety chain is in place. She finds Gopalakrishnan outside, who greets her. He and Bhaskaran follow her there and all of a sudden, Gopalakrishnan pulls out a gun saying that Bhaskaran will be spending the night with her. As she goes towards the telephone table where she has her appointments book, Gopalakrishnan speaks urgently to Bhaskaran in Tamil, which she cannot understand. Aasha Rani is entrapped with a stranger and she feels nervous about it. The very thought of having to make love to a man who is a professional murderer depresses her. She has to divert her mind from the stranger who has lurked in her house. "*Starry Nights* laced with sexuality, can be taken as a realistic study of astounding conceivable variety of sex, exploitation, and pseudo-glamour of tinsel world, teeming with perfidies, deceit, treachery, intrigues, crimes, and deep-rooted corruption" (Khare 148).

One night as Aasha Rani returns after a meeting with a client, Aasha Rani notices that flat is completely devastated and torn apart. She is shocked to see a pool of blood on the floor. Shonali comes to her rescue and finally tells her that "Bhaskaran's dead. And you had better get out of here fast. Here's your plane ticket- the flight leaves in two hours. Don't stop and start trying to pack. You know darling, you're lucky to be alive" (SN 220).

It is only after Aasha Rani finds herself on the British Airways flight, that she gets the chance to retrospect on the events that had overtaken her life. Her mind turns to Sasha and also she shivers as she recalled Gopalakrishnan's warning to destroy her someday. She arrives to an empty house in Bombay. She calls Jay to make sure if her daughter is safe. Jay tells her anxiously that they have received a couple of

anonymous calls. Aasha Rani talks to her daughter assuring that she will meet her soon. Sasha responds to her in a tiny voice that she needs Aasha Rani immediately.

Kishenbhai tells that Sudha could be indirectly responsible for all the events that happens to Aasha Rani in London. It all starts with Sudha borrowing money heavily for a film, which she wants to launch for herself and her boyfriend Amar. She gets into trouble with the financiers and disrespects Sethji when he questions her about her heavy debts. Hence, Sethji attacks her with his men leaving Sudha physically injured. Amma initially arrives to stay in the hospital with Sudha. It is Kishenbhai who has done all the running around while Sudha floated between life and death for over a fortnight.

Aasha Rani remains numb for a long time at the hotel as the news of her sister's accident was a great shock to her. Sandhya Rani Dash in her article sums up the situation as:

Aasha Rani stoically endures a series of shocks one after another- An incomplete childhood with a single parent, poverty, starvation, her mother's cruel dream to make her a film star, the devilish attitude of the people of the stardom to bruise and batter her femininity, the jealousy and unkindness of her sister Sudha, the collapse of her marital life and separation from her own child – Aasha Rani stoically endures a series of shocks one after another. (168)

Aasha Rani is disappointed to know that her father's health is deteriorating. He has not been much of a father, but in the last couple of years she begins to accept him. But with Sasha in her life, Aasha Rani knows that parenting is not only about survival lessons but it is also about something called love and affection. Amma has taught her

only to survive but never loved her truly. Aasha Rani promises to be a good mother to Sasha.

At home two wounded veterans are waiting to die, her Amma and Appa. On seeing Aasha Rani, he manages to convey her that there is something he wants her to read. He writes a parting letter in which he apologises for all the wrong that he did to them and their mother. He also explains in that letter on what circumstances of his life he was forced to abandon her mother. Aasha Rani has tears in her eyes after reading her father's words. It is the last paragraph that stuns her because Appa outlines his master plan for her future in it. He is bankrupt, the studio is closed, all the moveable assets are sold. But the name and the premises are transferred to Aasha Rani. She has to promise him that she will revive the family banner and re-open the studio, the only legacy he leaves for her. When she consents to his proposal, Appa nods and shuts his eyes, having contentment on his face. Aasha Rani's declaration of relaunching the glory of the studio shows the indescribable buoyancy of a woman though she has been betrayed by her father and her husband, Jay. Aasha Rani's filial love crosses all boundaries.

Aasha Rani decides to meet Sudha. The moment Sudha sees Aasha Rani standing next to her, she holds up her hands to hide her face saying: "I have been evil, I have sinned. Heaven knows what made me do it. I have done you so much harm. You don't have to forgive me" (SN 232). Aasha Rani loves her Sudha and want her to join the family, so she decides to forgive her and extends a hand of friendship towards her and tells her that it is the responsibility of both the daughters to reopen Appa's studio. Then very gently, she leans and kisses Sudha all over her face. Appa enthralled with pride when Aasha Rani says: "Our name will rule the industry and the studio will regain its glory. I promise you that, Appa. You will see that I shall do it

and prove it to you” (SN 234). “Despite her indulgence in indiscriminate sex and professional opportunism, Aasha Rani has a critical eye for sanctity of relations, which she unconsciously cherishes like a wish” (Vats 63).

In *Starry Nights* Aasha Rani’s exploitation by men in the showbiz and her husband Jay’s deserting her does not curb her desire to live a life of her own. She decides to rebuild the film studio of her father and finds solace in being a dutiful mother. (Neb. Shobha De: Read To or Not to Read 170)

Aasha Rani evolves into a stronger woman and decides to open her own production company. Though Aasha Rani was a victim to the frenzy situations in the glitz world, she cannot prevent Sasha from entering filmhood. That night while lying in her bed and watching the twilight through her window, Aasha Rani thinks of Sasha, who needs her the most. “The novel ends on no definite note. Aasha Rani imagines and visualizes Sasha’s return to India to become a popular heroine gracing movie hoardings and gossip magazines” (Barua 178). Aasha Rani abruptly visualizes her daughter innocent face on movie-hoardings and gossip-magazines. And Aasha sees a future star in her face as Sasha has the makings of a star on her face. She imagines her daughter in the role of an actress. Sasha getting into movies would be purely her decision but Aasha Rani promises herself not to force anything on Sasha as her Amma did to her. But if Sasha does enter the glamour world Aasha Rani can prevent many evils that happened to her. Sasha’s future and her life motivate Aasha to rebuild her father’s studio.

Shobha De attempts to unveil the crystals of reality hidden under the fog of glamour world on par with the trends observed in the Bombay social life. *Starry Nights* is a true example of power stuffed girl feminism. The novel gives a realistic

picture of a woman's struggle in a patriarchal world. Instead of acting as a victim De's protagonist of this novel Aasha Rani asserts her individuality and empowers herself. Her empowerment and assertiveness redefine the meaning of womanhood. In this novel Raunch culture and do-me feminism blends meticulously the concept of liberation of women and sexuality by heralding sexually provocative appearances and behaviours as an act of women empowerment. The majesty of womanhood is in a very palatable manner pictured in this novel.