OBSESSION AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN SHOBHA DE'S STRANGE OBSESSION

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Shobha De's Strange Obsession (1992) explores the complex relationship between emotional deprivation, desire, identity, control, and the search for personal fulfilment. Set largely within the sophisticated urban world of Bombay, the novel centres on Amrita Aggarwal, a young model, and Meenakshi Iyengar, popularly known as Minx, who develops an intense and possessive attachment to her. De presents two contrasting female experiences through these characters. Amrita struggles to preserve her independence while attempting to free herself from Minx's control, whereas Minx remains trapped within her emotional insecurity and obsessive desire. The novel therefore goes beyond the depiction of an unusual relationship and examines the psychological consequences of loneliness, lack of belonging, possessiveness, and the inability to establish a healthy sense of self. Critics have identified Minx's troubled childhood and psychological instability as central to the novel's treatment of obsession (Vats 1). De's treatment of these issues is particularly significant because the novel places women's desire, vulnerability, and agency at the centre of the narrative.

Minx is introduced as a powerful and privileged woman. She is the daughter of a senior police officer and possesses wealth, social influence, and material security. Yet her privileged circumstances do not provide her with emotional satisfaction. Her childhood is marked by loneliness, family instability, and a lack of sustained parental affection. Vats similarly observes that Minx's childhood is troubled by her father's transfers and her mother's preoccupation with social work (1). Thus, De establishes an important contrast between material privilege and emotional deprivation.

Minx's condition can be understood through the concept of belongingness. Material possessions cannot substitute for affection, acceptance, and emotional security. Her desire for Amrita consequently becomes much more than an attraction. It becomes an attempt to fill an emotional emptiness that has remained unresolved since childhood. Her attachment gradually changes into possession. Instead of recognizing Amrita as an independent individual, Minx attempts to make her part of her own emotional world. The distinction between affection and possession is therefore central to the novel. Love, when it respects another person's autonomy, can create companionship; obsession, by contrast, seeks control.

Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation provides a useful framework for understanding this aspect of Minx's character. Maslow explains human motivation in terms of a hierarchy of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs and extending towards love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (370–96). Minx has little difficulty satisfying her material and security needs. What she lacks is emotional belonging. Her wealth and social position cannot compensate for the affection and acceptance she desires. Her pursuit of Amrita can therefore be read as an unsuccessful attempt to satisfy an unmet emotional need. Instead of developing a balanced sense of self, however, Minx attempts to obtain fulfilment by

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controlling another person.

Minx confuses emotional fulfilment with possession. Her desire becomes increasingly intense as Amrita attempts to maintain distance. She gives Amrita expensive gifts, provides material support, and attempts to create circumstances in which Amrita becomes dependent upon her. The relationship consequently develops an unequal power structure. Minx has wealth, influence, and social connections, while Amrita is a young woman attempting to establish herself in the modelling world. This imbalance makes it difficult for Amrita to resist Minx at first.

The relationship between Minx and Amrita also raises important questions about consent and individual freedom. At certain moments Amrita submits to Minx's affection, but such moments do not erase the larger pattern of control in their relationship. Amrita gradually realizes that her dependence upon Minx is restricting her freedom. The emotional and physical intimacy that initially appears attractive or protective becomes oppressive because Minx expects complete possession. The relationship consequently moves from attraction to domination.

De uses this relationship to question conventional assumptions about female desire. The novel gives a woman, rather than a male character, the position of the pursuer and the possessor. Minx is financially powerful and socially confident, and she refuses to occupy the traditionally passive position assigned to women. However, De does not equate female power with emotional freedom. Minx's power over Amrita is destructive because it is founded on manipulation rather than mutuality. Her character therefore complicates the idea of female empowerment. Power by itself does not produce fulfilment; personal autonomy and emotional balance are equally important.

Amrita provides a contrasting model. She enters Bombay as a young woman seeking a career in modelling. Her movement into the city represents an attempt to create an independent identity. She is ambitious and willing to participate in a competitive professional world. However, her vulnerability as a newcomer makes her susceptible to Minx's influence. Minx initially offers protection, material comfort, and professional assistance. Amrita consequently finds it difficult to separate gratitude from dependence.

As the relationship becomes increasingly oppressive, Amrita begins to search for a way out. She thinks strategically about her future and considers marriage to Rakesh, who lives in New York, as a possible means of escaping Minx. She imagines that after reaching America she could establish herself independently and begin a new life. Her plan demonstrates the emergence of a stronger sense of self. Rather than waiting for another person to rescue her, she begins to construct her own solution. Her struggle is therefore not simply against another woman but against dependency itself. She gradually understands that material comfort cannot compensate for the loss of personal freedom.

The contrast between the two women becomes clearer through the idea of self-actualization. Maslow describes self-actualization as the realization of one's potential after more basic needs have been addressed (382–83). In literary terms, Amrita's journey can be

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understood as a movement towards greater self-awareness and autonomy. She experiences fear, confusion, and psychological pressure, but she gradually becomes capable of making decisions about her own future. Her eventual relationship with Rakesh is presented as a movement towards stability and companionship rather than the destructive possession represented by Minx.

Minx, in contrast, cannot achieve such fulfilment. Her emotional needs remain concentrated on Amrita. Even when she receives affection from her, she wants more certainty, more control, and greater possession. Her inability to accept Amrita's independence prevents her from developing a healthy identity separate from the object of her desire. Vats argues that the novel presents Minx through psychological anxiety and an inability to develop in a balanced manner (1–2). Her tragedy is therefore not simply that she loves Amrita, but that she cannot understand love without possession.

The novel also examines the influence of childhood experience on adult behaviour. Minx's emotional isolation provides an important background to her later actions. Her childhood experiences do not excuse the harm she causes, but they help explain the emotional insecurity underlying her behaviour. De presents a character who has material advantages but lacks the emotional foundations necessary for a stable sense of belonging. At the same time, Minx should not be reduced to a simple psychological case. She is intelligent, resourceful, financially powerful, and capable of manipulating people around her. Her obsession is reinforced by the social privilege that allows her to exercise control.

The novel's treatment of sexuality is significant because it places a female same-sex relationship at the centre of the narrative. However, the novel should not be read as simply presenting female same-sex desire as the cause of Minx's difficulties. The more important issue is the manner in which desire becomes possessive and coercive. Minx's behaviour is destructive because she refuses to recognize Amrita's freedom. Her problem is therefore located in the transformation of desire into domination. This distinction allows the novel to be examined in terms of power, consent, and individual agency rather than reducing it to a story about sexuality alone.

Minx's increasing desperation is evident when she goes to extraordinary lengths to retain Amrita. She attempts to reshape herself physically and emotionally according to what she imagines Amrita wants. Her actions demonstrate that she has begun to lose her own identity within the relationship. Instead of developing herself, she tries to reconstruct herself around Amrita. This is the opposite of self-actualization. Self-actualization requires the development of one's own capacities, whereas Minx's identity becomes increasingly dependent upon another person's response.

Amrita's response is consequently important because she learns to distinguish affection from dependence. She realizes that she cannot build her future within Minx's controlling environment. Her resistance gradually becomes stronger. When she considers leaving, she is not simply escaping an uncomfortable relationship; she is reclaiming her identity. Her eventual movement towards emotional stability demonstrates the possibility of recovery through self-awareness and independent decision-making.

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The violence at the end of the novel intensifies this contrast. Minx's attack on Lola and her increasingly destructive actions reveal the consequences of her inability to control her obsession. The acid attack becomes a particularly disturbing symbol of possessiveness. Amrita responds with anger and rejects Minx's behaviour, declaring that she will tell others about what has happened (De 67). At this point, the relationship has completely moved away from affection and into fear and violence.

The conclusion reinforces Amrita's movement towards a more stable life. Minx possesses wealth, authority, and social influence, but she cannot achieve emotional fulfilment. Amrita begins with fewer advantages, yet she develops the capacity to make independent choices. The novel therefore suggests that external privilege cannot guarantee inner fulfilment. Emotional balance, autonomy, and the ability to respect another person's freedom are essential to meaningful human relationships.

De's Strange Obsession is therefore not merely a narrative about an unusual relationship. It is an exploration of the relationship between emotional deprivation, desire, power, and identity. Through Minx, De depicts the destructive consequences of attempting to obtain emotional fulfilment through possession. Through Amrita, she presents a gradual movement towards autonomy and self-definition. Ultimately, Strange Obsession presents self-actualization as a process of recognizing and developing the self rather than controlling another person. Minx remains emotionally unfulfilled because her identity becomes dependent upon Amrita, while Amrita gradually moves towards independence by reclaiming control over her own life. Maslow's concept of human motivation helps illuminate this contrast: the satisfaction of material needs alone cannot provide complete fulfilment when the needs for belonging, esteem, and personal growth remain unresolved (370–96). De's novel consequently offers a complex representation of women's emotional lives, showing how the search for love can become destructive when it is separated from freedom, reciprocity, and respect for individual identity.

Works Cited :

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