



## ADVOCATING FEMININITY – A STUDY OF THE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE FICTIONAL WRITINGS OF SIDNEY SHELDON

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### Abstract:

Popular literature is currently occupying a lot of space in the mainframe study of literature. In fact what constitutes popular in the ambit of literature is much debated. With a change in the general structure of the syllabi in all universities, the genre popular literature has become quite a fascinating area and fictional writings that passed off as momentary are now back into discussion and deliberation. The present paper intends to take a look at one such very popular and successful American fictional thriller writer Sidney Sheldon. His works were bestsellers for decades and have been made into movies. The reason to delve into his writings is to study and thereby account for the immense popularity of the writer. What constituted his writings that made him so famous? Starting with question in mind, I discovered, after reading his works, that his women characters were very much every woman's inspiration. Coming from the pen of a male writer, these women are dynamic, ambitious and versatile, challenging the established patriarchal code. These women are not squeamish about their independence and their garrulous nature often lands them in trouble. Sheldon was writing when the second wave of feminism was in vogue in the U.S.A and given the context of the second wave of feminism these characters were very welcome. The paper delves into the heart of these women who challenged patriarchy.

**Keywords:** femininity, feminism, patriarchy, stereotype, popular, bestseller

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### *Advocating Femininity – A Study of the Women...*

The Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines the word ‘popular’ as ‘of the people’, ‘fit for the generality’. If applied to literature, it would mean literature that aims at generality or more precisely literature enjoyed by the people at large. The term ‘popular literature’ has come to occupy much of the consciousness of the modern twenty first century literary criticism and has come to be regarded as a genre by itself covering anything falling within the purview of the category ‘popular’.

Literature is very much culture oriented and popular literature has got to be considered in the light of popular culture. When we speak of a work done by a culture, it is usually of what culture does and for the past that we are thinking. Culture articulates, in the sense of giving shape to and sorting out, some part of the past as it can be of use to a particular present. Culture does work that, once done, becomes part of the habit structure of everyday perception. Within the present, culture stabilizes and incorporates nearly ungraspable or widely varied states of moral or representational or perceptual experience. It changes again and again what the census of human world looks like – what it includes or excludes – and it often does so in tandem with changes in social fact or legal categories. Where culture installs new habits of moral perception, it accomplishes as a last step, the forgetting of its own strenuous work so that the newly learned habits are only remembered as facts. The ambition to re design the common world is the ambition of the best instances of cultural work. Thus any literature is largely concerned with the workings of their culture and popular literature is a rendering of what comprises modern culture.

Popular forms are frequently repetitive and they are frequently read almost obsessively. Detective novels, westerns, romances are becoming part of what might be called a “diet of reality that returns again and again to the same motifs so that they might not slip away”. Any popular fiction consistently engaged in the task of mirroring the culture is then considered to be a ‘bestseller’. M.Thomas Inge has pointed out that “whenever an attempt is made to use a medium like popular books to study the attitude and values or behavior of a given time period or as these changes over time, the question of cause and effect must be considered.” In reference to best sellers a question might be asked, why do best sellers receive wide acceptance? Is it because they reflect their times or do they influence their readers to espouse new values and understand new modes of life? Perhaps the best answer is both. A survey, if conducted, might reveal that often best sellers differ widely, both in their subject matter and concerns and in their value systems. Some will closely resemble those of a preceding era, others will appear to be the product of a rebel, writing about a hoped for future. Whatever be the focus of best sellers, the one factor that unites all is that they are very useful in tracing changes in dominant attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns as they take place over the decades. If popular books are to be used as a reflection of society, it is then very important to determine the precise identity of the readers.

Another important trend in the popular bestseller research is to view the production of the bestsellers as a complex social and economic phenomenon of interest in and of itself. John Sutherland in *Bestsellers* has described this interest as follows – “One of the useful aspects of bestsellers is that we cannot see them as isolated texts with single minds behind them. We have to see them as books: things which are made and are successful in so far as they sell, not just things which are composed and are successful in so far as they are critically evaluated. Nor are bestsellers entirely made by their ‘authors’; a whole string of agents, editors and salesmen could

– if copyright law and literary convention allowed – claim ‘credits’ in an essentially corporate venture.”

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A study down the decades has shown that popular fiction has gained a wide readership in almost all countries. Whether they be mystery stories, detective fictions, suspense novels, thrillers, romances – popular literature occupies a dominant position in the literary market. Adverse criticism such as one made by Adrian Chambers, “The family of literature for young readers has its own parentage to live out. It was born of a humble, well intentioned mother named Simple Didactics, and sired by a cunning but aggressive father called Cheap Commerce. Many children of the family inherited the worst of the genes from both sides. Even now, they stick close to home and carry on the business of telling readers what to think on off – the – shelf stories, more notable for the craft of their marketing than the skill of their crafting.” – has little affected the fate of popular literature, whose interest rate is always on the rise.

As stated earlier the focus of such books always shifted with the winds of change in time. However, a consensus has been arrived at. Bestsellers that appeared during the years from World War II to the present can be treated as one unit, despite some changes that have taken place. The major noticeable feature of all these books, both individual works of fiction and the aggregate yearly lists of both fiction and non – fiction, is the recognition of the complexity of the world. Politics, religion, sex, psychology, health, love, crime and many other topics are combined in one book and definitely over the lists of books.

This is especially true of Sidney Sheldon, the Chicago born American writer who continued to thrill the readers across the globe with his works. Beginning with *The Naked Face* till the very last *Tell Me Your Dreams*, Sheldon dominated the American market. His appeal is global and his readers cover almost the entire spread of the continents. Sheldon is the most translated writer of fiction and it is no amazement that his fictions have been translated in fifty one languages. A casual glance at the copies sold would at once make the fact clear that Sheldon is the man who is the choice of almost all popular fiction readers. *The Rage of Angels* and *Windmills of the Gods* have sold over a hundred million copies, *The Other Side of Midnight* and its sequel *Memories of Midnight* over two fifty million copies, *The Stars Shine Down* around two ninety million copies. Sheldon is also perhaps the sole figure who has written the maximum number of bestsellers. In fact, most of his books, barring a few can safely be said to be blockbusters. His works have become products that can be produced in a whole variety of media, as hand back, mass paperback, and television and film adaptations.

What entralls his readers about his fictions is that there is no fixed category into which we can place his fictions. Just as we cannot simply attribute his works to be detective stories, nor can they be shelved as crime fictions or suspense novels. The whole corpus of his works ranges from the world of crime (*If Tomorrow Comes*, *The Other Side of Midnight*, *Memories of Midnight*) to suspense (*Morning, Noon and Night*, *Master of the Game*) to mystery (*The Naked Face*), to the judiciary and the executive (*Rage of Angels*, *Windmills of the Gods*) to the world of doctors and medicines (*Nothing Lasts Forever*), to the field of modern psychological findings on multiple personality disorder (*Tell Me Your Dreams*). Though it is difficult to contain his works in any particular category, two aspects run through and unites almost all his fictions. First his fictions are all thrillers – “A fast paced thriller ...The action escalates to an electrifying final scene”. This review made by the *Publishers Weekly* on *Windmills of the Gods* is true to all his other novels. The question pertinent at this stage is what are thrillers?

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In *The Whodunit* (1982), Stefano Benvenuti and Gianni Rizzoni define the thriller as “a narrative works (although it could also be extended to the theatre and film) that centres on some criminal plot and is constructed to build up maximum tension... The novelty lay in the combining of suspense and intrigue with action and excitement.” The common denominator then appears to be action, excitement and tension. Thrillers create tension through aggressive action. This definition is consistent with Rodell’s distinction that “suspense stories mix gothic elements with mystery and thrillers mix action.” This definition can readily be applied to Sidney Sheldon’s works where action, be it at the physical level or the psychological level, dominates.

Another aspect that is common to all his fictions is his characters. His characters, to a great extent, are manifestations of the proverb ‘failures are the pillars of success’. Whatever success his characters attain, no matter in what way, they all begin as nothing and gradually work their way up the ladder. But the most interesting part is that these characters slowly and gradually acquiring fame and profit are mostly women. Sidney Sheldon’s women characters are all dynamic personalities, endowed with ready intelligence, quick wit and ample grace. These women are paragons of beauty, but what adds to their charm and makes them interesting is their indomitable zest for success and glory. Sheldon’s writings are abundant with such powerful women personalities and they can be readily accepted as role models for the new age woman.

A study of these magnificent women can begin with a cursory glance at some of the reviews – “A nerve shattering thriller, graced by the most enchanting heroine (italics mine) in all of Sidney Sheldon’s novels” (Forecast on Windmills of the Gods). Tracy Whitney is perhaps the ultimate (italics mine) Sheldon heroine” (Denover Post commenting on Tracy Whitney of *If Tomorrow Comes*). “Fast paced ...we get the vengeful heroines (italics mine) that made the author instantly famous” (Rocky Mountain News). This is what the *The Literary Guild Magazine* had to say on Catherine in *Memories of Midnight* “The compelling portrayal of a resourceful woman (italics mine)”.

All these reviews make one thing very clear – Sheldon’s heroines are never the meek, easily moulded, subdued, boring types. They are, on the contrary, the achievers who have in them the ability and the power to challenge all odds and in conclusion emerge as survivors.

The debatable question whether his women characters are feminists can best be answered by Sheldon himself. He said –

Its never been a conscious decision. I think it’s because I really don’t believe in the ‘dumb blonde’ myth. The fact that my female characters have strong personalities but are also physically attractive probably reflects women I’ve known all my life.

Sheldon’s refusal to ascribe blankly to this ‘dumb blonde myth’ has produced a rich and fine class of dynamic women whose personalities have strongly held out against the patriarchal order.

In my effort to understand the female characters of Sidney Sheldon I have tried to make a distinction between them. According to me, Sheldon’s heroines fall into one of the three distinct and different orders. But what is fundamental to all these women, despite their order, is that there is a strong motive working behind their actions. Whatever they do it is because of their motives. In the first group are women who are motivated to make the best of them by a strong and driving ambition. Kate Blackwell (*Master of the Game*), Lara Cameron (*The Stars Shine Down*), Elizabeth Roffe (*Bloodline*), Paige Taylor (*Nothing Lasts Forever*) are some of the women who reach the top amidst all odds and difficulties. In the second category we have women who are motivated, to lash out against the existing order, by revenge. Tracy Whitney (*If Tomorrow Comes*), Leslie Stewart

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(The Best Laid Plans) are some examples. The third category is a little different from the above two. Here the women are not so much motivated by ambition or revenge but they are almost pulled out of their existing life styles and are thrown in to a whirlwind of action. Catherine Douglas (*The Other Side of Midnight*) and Mary Ashley (*Windmills of the Gods*) belong to this class.

What is common to Kate, Lara, Elizabeth and Paige is that they are all successful in their jobs and they have attained their success after a lot of hard work. The desire to be the best and never quit expressed by one protagonist is almost echoed by all of Sheldon's women. Whether they inherited their property or had to acquire it through skill and intelligence they radiate will power and strength. Kate's decision to run her father's company, "I'll never sell my father's company" (page 190) and reverberates in Elizabeth's decision, "I am not going to sell" (page 192). Even though she is made aware of the fact "There has never before been a woman on the board of directors of Roffe and Sons" (page 179) her choice was to stay and learn. Faced with problems about running companies these women never took the short way out. This ambition is also evidenced in Lara Cameron who had to work hard and become a billionaire. Her determination to be rich and powerful, "I want to own things...I want to own land: (page 48) shows her facing the worst of situations. In a traditionally male domain, she in the lone woman handling the difficulties associated with the real estate sector. Her fierce ambition earns her the reputation of "ice lady" but she comes to be accepted where she is despised the most – her staff members starts treating her with respect and compliments her, "Let's drink a toast to the best boss I ever had, or will have" (page 396). Paige Taylor, the doctor has to fight all her way through medical college and even the hospital where she is appointed. In a hospital where we seen hundreds of doctors working, Paige and her two women friends are the only lady doctors. It takes time to get accepted in this tight fist ed male occupation and these three women are continuously monitored in the radar of their male colleagues. These women ultimately find their own niche but their struggle suggests a society that is simply not ready to accommodate women as doctors. These women are mistaken as nurses as society expects women to be care giving tender nurses but not doctors. One of her colleague sneers at Paige, "If Florence Nightingale could do it, it is good for all women". Finally she is acknowledged as a "brilliant surgeon" (page 289). All these women have selected their career and they work hard to make a position for themselves. Their choice of profession in the male dominated sphere makes it challenging for them to compete and they even have to do more than their male counterparts but these women hang on till the end.

Tracy Whitney is the innocent woman who is charged for committing a crime she is ignorant of. When she learns that her mother has committed suicide she is berserk and she gets involved in a series of actions that lands her in prison. What is important to note is that Tracy becomes an easy prey for certain powerful men and these men almost play with her and her belief in the legal system of America. Falsely accused with murder she is forced to plan revenge on her perpetrators. Tracy Whitney is a woman who is not going to sit back and take abuses from the rest of the world. Her anger, "I'm not going to let them cheat me...No one is ever going to cheat men again" turns her into a one woman gang who brings the entire police department to its feet. Whether it be society that wrongs a woman or any man, the Sheldon heroines never forget and forgives. Leslie Stewart brought about the downfall of America's president, Oliver Russell when he leaves her and marries another woman to accomplish his political ambition. Leslie takes years to plan his ruin and almost lives up to her prophetic saying, "...before I am finished with him, I am going to make him wish he had never been born" (page 30).

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Sheldon intended his women protagonists to be clever and intelligent and equal men in every way is best exemplified when Leslie, very humourously puts before her fellow male colleagues – “Three men came across a female genie who promised to grant each one a wish. The first man said, ‘I wish I were twenty five percent smarter’. The genie blinked, and the man said ‘Hey, I feel smarter already’. The second man said, ‘I wish I were fifty percent smarter’. The genie blinked and the man exclaimed, ‘That’s wonderful!. I think I know many things now that I didn’t know before.’ The third man said, ‘I’d like to be one hundred percent smarter.’ So the genie blinked and the man changed into a woman.”

The women I have placed in the third category are quite contended with the way things are working for them. Mary Ashley, a professor at Kansas University suddenly finds herself facing disturbing situations. When she rejects the President’s offer to act as Ambassador to Romania, she cannot desert her family and relocate to Romania, her husband is relieved. Sheldon portrays in Mary’s husband, Edward a typical male who cannot accept career growth of his wife. It is not that Edward does not love her or respect her; he is conditioned by society to believe that women are caregivers in the family and it is their role, primarily to take care of the husband and children and then focus on career. In his candid confession – “I was jealous. I reacted like a spoilt brat. What would have happened if the President had made me an offer like that? I’d probably have jumped at it. Jesus! All I could think was that I wanted Mary to stay at home and take care of me and the kids.”

Turn in events propelled by the accident of Edward ultimately leads to Mary accepting the offer of Ambassador to Romania. Even in the job she is faced with job challenges and her quick wit and sheer presence of mind help her to turn every trouble in to an advantage. She refuses to let situation take control of her. It is Mary Ashley who is always in control of situation. Her dedication to her job brings her accolades and Sheldon is once again able to prove that women are as good as men in any job sector.

Thus a study of the different Sheldon heroines make the picture very clear – all the women are very powerful and successful and they all believe in retaining their individuality. They never submit or get subdued and are always eager to offer competition to their opposite sex. The one question still remains to be considered – are the Sheldon heroines feminists? To find an answer to this question I will quote from Sheldon’s interview – “My mother...my late wife, Jorga, and my current wife, Alexandra, epitomize the type of woman who is intelligent, purposeful and resourceful, but never at the expense of her femininity.”

This is also true of his female characters. They are all intelligent, purposeful and resourceful but never at the expense of femininity. His women characters continue to impress us as women who are always trying to achieve something for themselves and also as characters who very much want to be loved and cared for by men. Kate, Lara, Elizabeth in their pursuit of success never stop considering issues like love and marriage. As Kate admits, “There was not the slightest doubt in Kate’s mind that she was going to marry David Blackwell. He was the only man in the world for her” (page 180) or as Lara puts it, “It was an enchanted evening, and by the time it was over, Lara knew that for the first time in her life she was in love (with Philip). She had been so afraid that she might be disappointed, that no man could live up to the image in her imagination. But here was Lochinvar in the flesh, and she was stirred” (page 243).

While discussing the women protagonists in Sidney Sheldon’s fictional writings it really becomes contextual to understand what exactly was Sheldon intending to achieve with these

women. His characters range from homemakers to bankers to business women to doctors to psychic killers suffering from multiple personality disorder to lawyers. His gallery includes women in almost every profession and one factor that unites them is their unflinching ambition. Another aspect that is present in all these women is that they make the men sweat by their sheer determination and intelligence. These women, with their indomitable courage and zest to reach the height are a challenge to stereotypical women who are expected to remain within the limits drawn for them by the patriarchal world. These typical conventional women are at times given allowance, and to borrow from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, "...there are stringent limits to the variations on the stereotype, for nothing must interfere with her function as sex object. She may wear leather, as long as she cannot actually handle a motorbike; she may wear rubber, but it ought not to indicate that she is an expert diver or water-skier. If she wears athletic clothes the purpose is to underline her unathleticism. She may sit astride a horse, looking soft and curvy, but she must not crouch over its neck with her rump in the air", they are in actuality for the pleasure of men and enjoy their two seconds of glory at the behest of their men. In contrast the women in fictional writings of Sheldon are not these passive, objectified characters who are so persistently presented in canonical texts.

Sheldon's women characters are all achievers who pose a serious challenge to stereotypes. But what is rare and unique in them is that these women are not in threatened by their femininity. Infact these women consider their femininity to be an asset and they are never shy of being females. Simone de Beauvoir's opening statement in Book II of *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" argues that femininity is not the outcome of differences in biology or psychology or intelligence but is a construct of human civilization that believes in subordination of one class by the other. Simone de Beauvoir goes on to say that a woman learns her role from man in society, she is not born passive or secondary but is conspired into becoming the secondary citizen – the second sex. Sheldon's fictional characters use this aspect to their own advantage. As women are expected to learn about how they are to perform from men, these women use their education and turn it against men. These women do not give into the whims of the patriarchal society and they are all multi tasking. They have their careers, they nurture their families and they also crave for love. As Sarojini Sahoo commented in her article titled *Femininity and the Feminine Mystique*, "Women also experience so much pressure. They want a career, be independent, have a household, kids, etc., etc....And manage that, ALL at the same time. Still, every woman wants to be feminine and beautiful with her dresses, jewelry, and modest attitudes. They want to be very beautiful and soft, but at the same time, strong. And that kind of women I see as my inspiration -- a humble, kind, loving woman, but at the same time, strong and intelligent."

Feminism is an attitude attributed to the modern woman who believes in individuality, freedom to choose what she wants to do with herself. Feminism in practice happens to be very different from feminism in theory. Even when applied to real life feminism can mean a lot of things. There can be feminists who desire social, economic and cultural equality and freedom but still retain their femininity and there are feminists who will have nothing to do with the feminine attribute as they think it will cease to be feminists. Chris Weedon's definition of patriarchy in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* may be used here – "The term 'patriarchal' refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organisation of

procreation to the internalised norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference.”

One argument in favour of femininity can be placed here. While studying the Sheldon women I felt that the context of femininity applied to the Sheldon women is more in tune with Indian philosophical thought than the western idea. As Sarojini Sahoo wrote, “I solely believe that both masculinity and femininity are different, but they are always complimentary to each other. We cannot say which one is superior and which one is inferior. In Samkhya Upanishad, the philosophers of the Vedic period named these as Prakruti and Purusha. But in their concept, Purusha (masculinity) is passive and Prakruti (femininity) is “active.” The Samkhya philosophy has similar idea. It describes creation of life in the concept of Prakruti and Purusha. Prakruti is an all pervasive entity and has multiple aspects. It consists of three interchangeable elements called “gunas” and these “gunas” embody three parts – sattva, rajas and tamas. These “gunas” are integral part of Prakruti and Prakruti is active. On the other hand, Purusha is inactive and passive but nevertheless alert, infinite and eternal. “Under the inscrutable influence of Purusha, the equilibrium in Prakruti is disturbed and the whole universe of unlimited permutations and combinations comes into existence”. Sahoo concludes by saying, “I believe the role of femininity can be explained in no other way. Femininity is thus considered as Shakti or a source of energy in ancient Indian Philosophy. It is a regrettable and astonishing fact that while discussing “femininity”, we discuss Christian ideology or psychoanalysts’ point of view but never has anyone addressed the idea of this Indian philosophy in these discussions.” Viewed in this context it becomes simple to understand the representation of women in Sheldon. They are forms of sources of energy, all encompassing, engulfing, vibrant and at the same time tempered, nurturing and caring.

Popular commodities serve primarily as indicators of the socio-psychological characteristic of the multitude. Popular writings are very much culture specific and cater to the needs of the moment. Sheldon started writing fictions when the second wave feminism was in full swing in USA. Hence his non conventional women inspired many. As Sheldon himself said, “I’ve tried to make my heroines as different as possible. I don’t make a point of investing them with all the virtues of womanhood”, he never really had much faith in stereotypical projection of womanhood. He further said, “Because I genuinely love women, I try to put myself in a woman’s place when I write about her,” he said. ‘I have complete empathy with women. I feel their fear, their hunger, their emotions when I write.’ This role reversal on the part of the writer is really unique and the remarkable success of the writer shows that his fictions were readily accepted by the public. The versatility of his stories and his characters have accounted for his immense popularity and as has been stated earlier in this paper Sheldon remained the best selling writers for decades with his works getting translated into multiple languages.

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