

## Analysis of Women and Their Relationships with Society in Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights*

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Among the distinguished literary writers of South Asia, Shobhaa De holds an elevated position. Being a novelist and a columnist, she contributed profusely to South Asian literature. Shobhaa De's first career choice was modeling which she pursued for some time and had proved herself as well. In 1970, she switched her career to journalism. Shobhaa offered her editorial skills to renowned magazines like Stardust, Celebrity and Society. Her column for The Times of India named 'Politically Incorrect' earned great praise. In her columns, she comments on various issues ranging from social, economic to political dynamics.

Subsequently, she directed her attention toward literary writing choosing the novel form as medium of her work. In 1989, she published her debut novel entitled, *Socialite Evenings*. The novel explores the dynamics of elites of Indian society. In fact, the book has a semi-autobiographical air to it. It highlights the decay of the social values, morality and culture. The socialites are portrayed as immoral and degenerated people who have traded their moral values for materialistic gain. The novel was heavily criticized for its controversial content, though it sold out and gained commercial success.

Shobhaa De's literary writing journey eventually turned her into India's bestselling author. More than 17 of her novels climbed the bestselling books charts at once. Her works have been translated into many languages. The reform and rise of women's fiction is accredited to Shobhaa for her daring to voice her thoughts in her writing. Her second novel, *Starry Nights*, is allegedly inspired by two famous Bollywood off-screen couples. The book discusses the dynamics of the Indian showbiz industry. Yet again it was an instant success establishing Shobhaa as a distinguished writer. Her other book named *Spouse – The Truth About Marriage* surveys the institution of marriage in the urban society. Over twenty thousand copies were sold on its first day of official launch.

Her style of writing is deemed a breath of fresh in the Indian literature. The highly individualistic style of writing that does at times seems provocative and bold. Another interesting fact about her writing is her invention of 'Hinglish', an uncanny blend of Hindi and English. Readers found this language a refreshing change in the Indian literature produced in 'Hinglish'.

Some of her other highly popular novels include *Second Thoughts*, *Sultry Days*, *Speedpost* and *Uncertain Liaisons*.

Besides literary writing, Shobhaa is also recognized for her scriptwriting for Indian television soaps. She has penned down numerous soaps including *Swabhimaan*, India's first ever soap. Moreover, her television appearances have increased with her popularity. A significant television show, *Power Trip*, was hosted by Shobhaa as well. Her regular participation on several television debate shows also earned her an esteemed position in electronic media.

Currently, Shobhaa is involved in writing novels, columns and television appearances simultaneously. She writes columns for a periodical named 'The Week'. Her columns examine the issues also discussed in her novels about the worrisome behavior and attitude of our generation. However, she has been severely criticized for influencing young generation's behavior by her provocative writings.

*Starry Nights* is Shobha De's second novel the characters, Aasha Rani and her lover Akshay, were based on the real life love-affairs of Amitabh Bachchan with Rekha Ganesan and Dharmendra Singh Deol with Hema Malini. It was a best seller in India and cemented its authors reputation as being a provocative and daring author.

The protagonist of the novel is Aasha Rani, a dark, chubby girl from Madras who has striven for seven years to become a famous Bollywood starlet. Her mother, Amma, has pushed her to attain this status by selling herself into the world of blue films before she was twelve years old, and when she was fifteen to Kishenbhai, a once-famous producer who was encouraged by Amma to take her as a lover in exchange for a film role. Kishenbhai, unable to secure a role for her any other way, finances a film with his own money after promoting her as the newest Bollywood starlet and having her sleep with the appropriate people to secure her attention and renaming her from Viji to Aasha Rani. He then proceeds to fall madly in love with her, who abandons him as she strives to get ahead in the filmi world, fully aware that she was just being used by him at first and is thus unable to return the affection of the older man.

She falls in love with Akshay Arora, a famous Bollywood sex symbol who stars in a string of hits with her. Amma, who had been living with her in Mumbai, was sent away to Madras by Aasha for objecting to Akshay beating her one day. Eventually Akshay gets bored with her and after his wife confronts her unsuccessfully about her affair with her husband, he reveals to Showbiz magazine that she was a former pornographic actress, and effectively has her blackballed from making further films. When she accosts him at a society party about this, he beats her. Sheth Amirchand, a Member of Parliament and the gangster that controls most of the Mumbai underworld, then takes an interest in Aasha Rani and she becomes his lover and restarts her career under his protection. She then has an affair with Linda, a gossip columnist for Showbiz magazine and Abhijit Mehra, the son of an industrialist, who is about to be married. Linda advises her to go to the south and do an art film, which she does, where she tries to seduce the director only to find that he is impotent. Her interest in her work declines as she continues to obsess over Akshay Arora. She confronts him at a traffic light as their cars are next to each other

and their affair is rekindled for a short time. She attempts to get Akshay to marry her, but when it becomes apparent that his interest in her is only due to his flagging stardom and not out of affection for her, she attempts suicide.

Her lesbian lover Linda, meanwhile, writes a juicy scoop on her suicide attempt. After she recovers she rekindles her affair with Abhijit Mehra, but Malini, Akshay's wife, reports this to his father and he has his weak-willed son Abhijit cut the affair off and sends Aasha to New Zealand with instructions to keep out of Abhijit's life. Aasha then retires to New Zealand and decided to leave the film business. She marries a New Zealander named Jamie Phillips (Jay) and has a child with him. Since Jay is not Indian and not in the film business, it occurs to her that she does not have to retire once she is married as is the custom in India. It is then revealed that Akshay has succumbed to AIDS as a result of his promiscuous lifestyle. Sudha Rani claims that Jay tried to seduce her and in revenge, Aasha Rani initiates an affair with Jojo, the producer of her next film.

Aasha Rani is forced out of the film industry by Jojo's wife, who sends goondahs to threaten her. She flies back to New Zealand and meets a man called Gopalakrishnan who she has sex with in the bathroom of the plane. She discovers that her husband is having an affair with her babysitter and they decide that their marriage is over. Her daughter, Sasha rejects her and begins to have her own identity crisis as a multiracial child. Aasha then meets a young lady named Shonali who she begins to spend a lot of time with. She is a London socialite and call girl and introduces Aasha to London High Society. At a party, Aasha notices Gopalakrishnan, the man she had sex with on the flight to London. He turns out to be an arms dealer. She accosts him and later he has an assassin quartered at her house and threatens to have her daughter murdered if she tells. Shonali murders the assassin and ushers Aasha Rani out of the country.

Sudha Rani has meanwhile had a film financed by the mob and she begins to doctor the novels instead of repaying her debts. The gangsters have her assaulted by some thugs and they set her on fire. Sudha Rani is badly burned and is forced out of the film industry, and Aasha reconciles with her. As Appa weakens, he reveals that he has kept position of a studio that Aasha can use to support herself by preparing her daughter, Sasha, to take her place as Bollywood's next starlet.

*Starry Nights*, the second novel of Shobhaa De, is said be based on real-time Bollywood affairs. Hence the book is also being referred as 'Bollywood Nights'. The novel was a good success in early 1990's. As an upshot, it cemented Shobha De's position in the Indian literature arena as a bold novelist. She is often referred as a bold novelist because she features female characters in her novel and sex is something inseparable. The novel was in the limelight because of its Bollywood-oriented theme. This novel, some say, has done considerably damage to the reputation of Bollywood stars, for instance, Amitabh Bachan and Rekha and some more star affairs.

Aasha Rani and Akshay Arora are the lead protagonists of the story. However, there are many other characters in the book, like Malini – the wife of Akshay, a lesbian journalist, a pimp

mother, blood-sucking distributors, producers and actors. Aasha Rani, once a porn star, is a dusky actress who has come from Madras to Bombay to become something outside the fences of porn cinema. On the other hand, Akshay Arora is a famous Bollywood star, a heartthrob of millions. When she meets and shares bed with him, she soon becomes a hot aspiring actress in Bollywood. How she became that - we all know casting couch works wonder in the industry.

Shobhaa De's novels are like spicy movies, so does this book. First time readers may find it gripping otherwise it is a warts-and-all. If reintroduced in this gadget-filled era, this book could cross its already set peaks, commercially as well as emotionally. The rise and fall of a Bollywood star is a good thing about this book, and revelations of the inside stories about Bollywood industry are amazingly researched and brought forward honestly.

Before pursuing a career into writing, Shobha De was a top model so she knows better what cooks best in the industry. *Starry Nights* is a spiced-up, racy novel. Other than the feminism approach, De has superbly explored the meaning of marriage in high societies. Akshay Arora chooses Aasha Rani for perfect bed chemistry over her wife, Malini, since he knows he cannot do whatever he does with Aasha Rani. When Malini approaches her and accuses of her for emotionally abducting her husband, Aasha Rani coolly replies that she – Malini – is full of hatred, possibly one reason that keeps her husband away from her.

The novel provides useful insight as how women and their relationships work in the high societies and what options they seek to remain in the relationship, and how to keep alive their physical desires.

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