

Shobha De and Feminism

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Shobha De is one of the most distinguished and popular Indian novelists of our time; she is India's best-selling author. She was born in Maharashtra in 1948 and was educated in Delhi and Bombay. She graduated from St. Xavier's College, Bombay, with a degree in Psychology. She began a career in journalism in 1970 in the course of which she founded and edited three popular magazines Stardust, Society and Celebrity and was consulting Editor to Sunday and Megacity. She earned both name and fame while working as a freelance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines.

Shobha De as a writer is gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. The way she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really wonderful. The orthodox people in India criticise her for her open discussion of sexual matters. But her fiction has got tremendous response not only from several European countries but all over the world. All classes of people read and enjoy her fiction. It is no less an achievement. In fact, as a writer she differs considerably from other Indian women novelists writing in English. She is a writer who believes in very frank narration of incidents and absolute open-heartedness. We don't find anything reserved in her fiction from narrative point of view. In my opinion, she is the last person to care for what orthodox readers say about the subject-matter of her fiction. As a creative writer, she is becoming immensely popular day by day. Most of the readers enjoy her extraordinary narrative technique as well as her subject-matter.

One of the major reasons of Shobha De's popularity as a writer is her intimate understanding of the psyche of woman and her problems. Her treatment of the contemporary urban woman's position and the challenges she faces is not without significance. Largely speaking, Indian fiction depicts three kinds of women: first, the poor women, belonging mostly to the rural class, portrayed by writers like Kamala Markandava and R.K. Narayan; secondly, the middle class women, especially the educated and employed, depicted by writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande; and thirdly, the neo-rich aristocrat women depicted by writers like Namita Gokhale and Shobha De.

Shobha De has been many things to many people: super model, celebrity journalist and best-selling author. Her enigmatic personality has held her admirers under some kind of a spell. The present book attempts to make an inquiry into the nature and content of her fictional

writings. During the period of last ten years since she started writing fiction, she has received a mixed response: her detractors dub her as the princess of pornography while as her admirers extol her as a kind of queen among storytellers having irresistible appeal to the readers. Her novels, says R.S. Pathak in ‘Feminist Concerns in Shobha De’s Works.’ seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. The picaro in this case is a woman but she, too, is avid of experiences, in search of which she goes from place to place.

Thematically, Shobha De’s novels are highly complex. They offer sufficient stuff to the critics to interpret them in varied ways. Sarbani Sen discusses the domain of cultural politics in Do’s fiction. Shobha De gives vivid picture of the society and culture of the high society of contemporary India. Eminent Italian scholar Alessandro Monti evaluates the fiction of Shobha De in terms of ‘the making of modern India.

Shobha De has been referred to in the most number of multilingual gossip columns she was a clue in a noted crossword puzzle; she is undoubtedly the most reactionary novelist (her first three novels have been chosen by the reputed School of Oriental and African Studies of London as course material); and she was the first person to popularize the now much read and heard Indian Esperanto: Hinglish. If De has been selected, it means that she is being taken more seriously. It is also because her fiction portrays the contemporary reality more distinctively than that of other writers.

Shobha De is essentially a feminist writer. Like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande, she concentrates on women’s problems and gives a new approach to them. She is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. For this, she explores the world of urban women in India. In Two Aspects of Feminism. The Expressive and the Explosive in Shobha De,” Sanjay Kumar discusses the women’s role to challenge and protest in Shobha De’s novels Sisters and Strange Obsession. According to Pushp Lata, Shobha De’s female protagonists are remarkable when measured against men. The man-woman’s complementary image has been completely shattered in her novels. This is her viewpoint in her article “A Protest against the Patriarchal in Shobha De’s Works.’

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The prime objective of this paper is to make an inquiry into the nature and content of her fictional writings. During the period of last ten years since she started writing fiction, she has received a mixed response: her detractors dub her as the princess of pornography while as her admirers extol her as a kind of queen among storytellers having irresistible appeal to the readers.

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The present paper aims at considering Shobha De's treatment of feminist issues as found in her novels with particular reference to *Snapshots*. Shobha De's explosive novel called *Snapshots* presents 'Snapshots' from the life of six Women who were friends at school—"the 'girls' from Santa Maria High School, leading predictable, mundane lives of domesticity and imagined bliss."(13) These friends had drifted away in due course and "disintegrated through marriages, transfers and unshared interests " (11) One of them residing in London is called upon to write, direct and produce a "bold and meaty" serial, on "the exciting world of the Nineties' Indian urban women," for which she needs "authentic voices." (222) The get-together of these 'Sisters of the Subcontinent' at the house of one of them, Reema, begins well. Despite their problems and initial resistance, they all attend it. There is so much to catch on and memories start to surface—some happy, others bittersweet and some downright poisonous. As Swati, the spirit behind this get-together, tells them:

We aren't here just to chit-chat. I want to know everything about everybody from the time we left school. Every single dirty detail. What happened to all the boyfriends? Where did the school crushes go? And the breathless infatuations? (90)

Infidelity, incest, rape, lies and even death and the evil that lurks beneath the apparently placid everyday lives of these six women form the substance of the novel appropriately called *Snapshots*. These women represent different kinds of urban women in India, but are hardly better than “schoolgirls playing adult games.” (181) Forced to confront dark secrets that they thought lay buried deep in the past, these women begin to turn against one another and the mood of the party turns nightmarish, ending with the suicide of one of them. It is through their behaviour and conversation that Shobha De throws significant light on the predicament of women in India.

The cardinal issue thrashed by Shobha De in her novels relates to power, the desire to dictate and direct action and thinking of others, which is uppermost in human psychology. Hobbes is not the only one to talk about mortals obsessed with “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death.

Shobha De’s novels have emphasized the value of equivalence of power. Whenever this balance collapses, there is tension in society and double-dealings and hypocrisy predominate. The novelist can easily visualize a change in this respect taking place in the contemporary society, but men, she says, are not willing to accept it and “many men expressed their anxiety over the changed power equation.” (5)

Significantly enough, the term ‘power’ and its synonyms have been reiteratively used in *Snapshots*. Who would know about the power game better than Champabai, a brothel-owner, who says to Rashmi:

Never give yourself to any man for free. You know why? Men don’t value anything they get so easily. That’s why we are here: to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over women. Power over us—you and me. If they buy your sex, pay for you, they feel like kings. Give it to them with love for nothing and they’ll kick you in the gut. (43)

In an affair with her husband’s brother, Reema is said “to have invested [her] all into this crazy arrangement. . . He has the power. You don’t.” (116) A perfect rake like Balbir asks these six women to be honest with themselves and tell him: “Do you fuck because you enjoy fucking? Or is it power-play?” (162) It is “powerful” people like Juan Mendonca who can play politics as fiercely as trade on international exchanges. (194) Even women like Swati look like a small fly before their resources—Swati who has had “some kind of power over” her friends and others; “All you have to do is snap your fingers and the rest of us will jump.” (181) Her capacity to “manipulate” has been variously recognized. (183) Even Aparna, who has for her a “mixture of revulsion and fascination,” “reluctantly acknowledged the power Swati still exerted over her and to a lesser degree over the rest of them.” (209) The basic theme of Shobha De’s novels can thus be described in terms of the cat-and-mouse syndrome of power play.

Shobha De has brought in pertinently economic aspects of power struggle. “Eventually,” she says, “everything boils down to money— that great leveller. There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else.”¹⁶ Aparna in *Snapshots*, is a “corporate woman, an Indian corporate woman. A businesswoman”

who can fend for herself at the time of need, (180) and it is an account of economic considerations that Rashmi and Swati lead 'liberated' life. Having exhausted her passion on Raju and in the wake of the resultant frustration, Reema turns into "an unfeeling, mechanical woman with her eyes fixed on the next big guy—piece of jewellery, a prized acre of farmland, [and] gold in its most basic form. It was greed that kept her going. A greed that no longer excited her." (93) The 'new' Indian women who have attained economic independence are "a breed apart" from others. They enjoy economic independence and their attitude is characterized by a rare seriousness:

They were no-nonsense women who had 'take me seriously' written all over them. They even, wore business suits to work and carried burgandy-Coloured briefcases. . . They took their jobs with an earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity. Workaholism for women had become very fashionable.'⁷

Shobha De, however, while advocating economic independence of women, would not approve of mania for money. She makes' Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights* burst out on her overpowering mother: "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I'm fed up of being your money machine. I've done. enough for everybody . . . now I want to live for myself and enjoy my life."¹⁸ Money is important, she seems to suggest, but living one's own life is even more important.

The institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of your people in India. In the life of a woman it marks a point of maturing: it signifies the flowering of life. According to Dharmasatras, marriage is a sacrament. The ideal has now got diffused with time and it is being dominated by ulterior considerations. "Marriage," says Simone de Beauvoir, "is the destiny traditionally offered by society."¹⁹ It has been pointed out that "History proves that marriage is essential to the well-being of human society, and that celibacy brings ruin upon states."²⁰ The institution of marriage has provided for the society's needs for love, security and children. On account of various factors such as sexual promiscuity women's growing economic independence, increased rate of divorce.

Educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De's novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death (nticarami) is replaced generally by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners. The change in attitude towards marriage represents, according to De, "a big step forward":

The terms underlying marriage have. . . been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a lifelong meal-ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go.⁽²²⁾

In *Snapshots*, women have diverse marital status. Reema and Surekha are married housewives, who have had arranged marriages and were able to get “a prize catch” each in “the highly competitive marriage market.” (104) Rashmi is an unwed mother saddled with the responsibility of a based son. Swati and Aparna are divorcees. Swati led a life of her own with her former husband in London. They led “Separate but friendly lives. . . We loved each other dearly but we led strictly individual lives.” (189) And now she lives the life of a liberated woman. As for Aparna, she is not prepared to repeat the “mistake” of marrying again, (149) and even the term ‘husband’ is an “Awful word” for her. (24) Noor is still a maid and is doomed to die unmarried at the end of the novel.

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