

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



**DEPICTION OF LIBERATED AND
EMANCIPATED WOMAN IN SHOBHA DE'S FICTIONAL WORKS**

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ABSTRACT

Shobha De has explored imaginatively the varied world of women characters in her fiction. She emphasizes the quest for meaning of life, identity and unfulfilled emotional life of the characters through her novels. The object of the present paper therefore, is to provide certain clues for a better understanding of women characters in her novels. It is a modest attempt to study De's women characters in the light of their domestic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Being a woman De is more aware of the predicaments of women. She presents the vital reality and makes us aware of the miseries of women and injustices done to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society. As a result, the women in her novels appear as life like human beings.

KEYWORDS : Liberated And Emancipated Woman , socio-cultural backgrounds , Shobha De's Fictional Works.

INTRODUCTION :

Shobha De (b.1948), born in a typical middle-class Maharashtrian family, educated in Delhi and Mumbai, has emerged as a major novelist on the Indian literary scene. Though her writing consists of novels, stories, letters, essays and an autobiography, she is more known as a modern Indian woman novelist than anything else. Her fictional output consists of seven novels, *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *Sisters*(1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996). As a creative writer she occupies a significant place in the history of Indian novel in English.

All of her novels are characterized by her sense of empathy for the women who, having come out of the bounds of domesticity and marriage, assert their identity. Shobha De dives deep into the hearts of the liberated upper class women in the contemporary society and depicts the real characters as they are and not as they ought to be.

In the Indian tradition marriage is the turning point and the beginning of a new way of life. It is glorified as a holy union of man and woman. It is a ritual that involves the sanctity of Agni or holy fire, the 'Sapathapadi', the mantras like 'Dharmecha', 'Kaamecha' and fidelity till death. However, in Shobha De's novels all these ideas regarding marriage are shattered by her modern liberated women. As the women do not find happiness in marriage, they go out in search of more fulfilling experiences without any hesitation. De depicts the breaking up of the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In this context Shobha De's confident, attractive and assertive women redefine the concept of marriage. Accordingly, man and woman do not become one in marriage; instead they merely become partners in conjugal bliss. With marriage the other important issue that De's novels deal with is sex. Sex to her women is no longer a dreaded and despised thing. Her women enjoy a great deal of sexual freedom. Even marriage cannot prevent them from enjoying sexual freedom. The moment their marriages fail, they establish extra-marital relationships.

Thus like her other novels, here too, Shobha De examines the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. According to Shantha Krishnaswamy "Her women characters try to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this trapeze act, they are further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them, when they face loneliness and lack of communication and community and are finally brought to mental crises when masculine and institutional pressures are added to exacerbate them further."

Shobha De successfully depicts the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women in dealing with the situations emerging from a clash between conservatism and liberalism. She also highlights in her novels certain issues such as the non-acceptance of the liberated woman by the Indian society, women's freedom in contemporary India and an individual dilemma.

Shobha De differs considerably from other Indian women novelists in English because she believes in a very frank narration of incidents and openheartedness. Nothing is reserved in her fiction. As a result, the orthodox people in India criticize her for her open discussion of sexual matters. But she is the last person to care for what the orthodox readers say about the subject-matter of her fiction. In fact, all classes of people not only in India but all over the world read and enjoy her fiction. It is no less achievement. As a woman novelist, Shobha De has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. She has great understanding of the depth of the psyche of woman and her problems. She explores the world of urban woman and emphatically says that even in the modern times with all socio-political as well as economic achievements, the graph of woman exploitation is shockingly rising.

Sometimes due to the unavoidable circumstances in their lives, women are pushed into the net by their protectors while at other times their high ambition and will to assert their freedom endanger them. Shobha De's women don't believe in suffering submissively. They struggle with all their strength to reach the peak of joy and success in male-dominated society. They revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves and earnestly protest against subordination. Shobha De is undoubtedly a feminist as the important concern of all her writings is 'Woman'. It is the woman who occupies the central place in her fictional

world. But her women characters do not belong to the first 'FEMININE' phase. As a feminist Shobha De belongs to the third phase of 1920 onwards, which Elaine Showalter has described as the 'FEMALE'. It is the phase of self-discovery, search for identity and liberation. However, her protagonists do not remain fixed to one phase. Instead, they transcend from the 'FEMINIST' towards the FEMALE, that is, from the stage of protest against the patriarchal modes towards the process of self-discovery. As a writer of women-centred fiction, Shobha De is aware of the fact that the most remarkable difference between man and woman lies in woman's sexuality. She opines that if a woman has to establish a true identity of her own, she must shatter the economic, socio-political and cultural barriers imposed upon her by various forces since time immemorial. Her novels clearly reveal her attempts to shatter the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society. In this male-dominated society, women from their childhood are made to learn how to compromise and adjust with secondary status. Adolescent stage makes them think that their desires will be fulfilled in their marriages for they look at marriage as a solution to their problems. But in reality, marriage shatters all their dreams and they suffer miserably in their marital lives. And this confusing situation compels them sometimes to take such step, which is a major deviation from the established traditional norms.

Shobha De's preoccupation with different aspects of woman's life makes her portray a variety of women from the traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated. This variety of women depicted in her novels brings out different ways in which these women are subjected to male hegemony. It also shows the types of protests registered by these women against patriarchal male-domination. An interesting feature of Shobha De's portrayal of these women is the presence of subgroups of women, within the main group, that may be highly liberated, oppressive and dominating. They include the modern and the traditional Indian middle-class women.

The novelist has very cleverly projected the glamorous images of the attractive, independent and highly professional women trying to dominate the power structure. But the outward glory of life these women seem to enjoy is marked by frustration and disgust. It is an outcome of their deviant behaviour. The traditional Indian women, in spite of feeling hopeless and suffocated, try to adjust themselves in the social system prescribed by the male dominated race, milieu and momentum. As a result, Shobha De realistically presents the images of different types of women in her fiction.

The present study attempts to make comprehensive critical comments on the fiction of Shobha De with an emphasis on the image of woman portrayed in her novels. It aims to assess her novels and explore the versatile personality of Shobha De. It is also intended to show how Shobha De is different from other Indian women writers in English. Since it seeks to explore and explicate overall images of women appeared in her novels, it would be a fascinating study from the Indian point of view.

Shobha De's novels indicate the emergence of a new woman curious to revolt against the traditional moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. Her novels represent the new Indian Woman's Voice. A 'New Woman' is in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. A comprehensive evaluation of De's novels makes clear her protest against the established image of woman as an auxiliary. She tries

forcefully to undo this distorted image of woman who cries for freedom and equality which is still an unheard melody in the patriarchal world. From this point of view, the women depicted in her novels are more powerful than men. They represent an authentic picture of the modern Indian women. They are sexually liberated. Shobha De portrays the bifurcation between "He" and the "Other". She challenges the traditional definition of morality and projects the image of the modern woman as self-reliant, free-thinking and having a new code of morality like the western women. She is a staunch supporter and an ardent follower of feminism. Hence, her woman should regard herself as the 'self' and face the challenges in life in the days of globalization.

Shobha De realistically presents in her fiction the models of different types of women. The characteristics of New Woman as defined are well justified in the fictional world of Shobha De. Her fiction has proved its worth by being authentic to the changes taking place in the society at the end of millennium. Shobha De opines that with changing scenario, there is need on the part of women to seek their identity.

Shobha De indicates that woman may consider leading a life of singlehood but the subsequent isolation and loneliness will be its natural outcome. There are varied ways of protest of women. They reject all the traditionally established patterns of behaviour. They concentrate on gaining power in man-woman relationship. De creates alternative female identity where a woman sometimes takes the role of man and another takes the role of a 'Free Woman'. In the process of exploration of the aspects of feminist position, Shobha De exposes the women's misunderstanding regarding their freedom and mocks at their way of asserting their individuality by posing to be men without concentrating on female empowerment as a whole. Her women protagonists like Karuna, Mikki, and the young women like Anjali, Ritu, Alisha, Sudha Rani, Amrita, Swati, Surekha, Aparna and Reema practise free sex. They fail to understand that their sexual freedom is being used and abused by men. The novelist suggests through these women characters that, whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously disregard morality in the name of their struggle for success in life, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering.

Twentieth century marks the emergence of many women writers on the Indian literary scene. Most of the novels have been written from the women's point of view and though the long silence is broken and women express their anguish, the picture is still grim. Although the women wish to take a bold step, because of certain values instilled in them right from childhood, they feel a sense of guilt if they break the established norms. For instance, Malini in *Starry Nights* who, in preference to her husband, children and family, gives up her career as a gazal singer. Maya in *Second Thoughts*, complies with the traditional norms. Naturally very limited freedom is granted to such women. Sooner or later they learn to adjust, as there is no other alternative, if they need to live a respectful life. Maya, too accepts to remain enveloped in the loneliness and sadness of her life. On second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Mumbai, but also of her marriage. This clearly shows that the reality hidden behind the glamorous and glittering life of the modern women is extremely bitter because after the temporary glamour vanishes, they have to learn to live with the stark realities of life.

Since Shobha De explores the world of urban women in India, she considerably differs from other Indian women novelists in English in respect of her point of view. Like Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai, she is not in favour of the concept of the traditional ideal Indian woman as a doll. Kamala Markandaya in her novels examines the transition of women from a traditional society to an urban, metropolitan society. She portrays the Indian life in the villages. Arundhati Roy believes in submissiveness of women, Anita Desai's realism is psychological one whereas Shobha De depicts sordid reality. She treats the taboo subject like sex with open-heartedness. She concentrates only on the problems of urban women and their psychology and neglects the rural women in her fiction. She deals with the problems of the neo-rich women who defy rebelliously against the moral orthodoxy of the age-old patriarchal social system.

The image of a woman reflected in her novels is of a modern or ultra-modern rebellious woman who is strong and bold enough to achieve social and economic equality in a male-dominated world. De is a feminist novelist with a serious purpose. Her novels are not only thrillers or entertainers or a series of 'bodice ripper'. Though most of the eminent critics have neglected her as a major fiction writer for her free, frank and naked descriptions of battles of sex, her novels serve a purpose as an eye-opener to the Indians. She is an advocate of justice, liberty and equality of women and regarding women question she says, "I did write with a great deal of empathy toward women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation".

Shobha De's women do not reach to the height of Catherine in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Devi in Nayantara Sahgal's *A Situation in New Delhi*, Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Uma in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* or Eliza Doolittle in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*. However, De is a writer with a purpose. Though she is condemned in a literary circle as a pornographic author, her point of view and intentions are apparently different. She is an advocate of sex and does not hide anything about biological phenomenon in her novels. Her novels reveal the Freudian psychology through the male and female characters. Her female characters of subjugated, marginalized, rebellious or neo-rich type have their own faults. They are devoid of real motives, intentions or feelings.

The characters such as Anjali, Aasha Rani, Sudha Rani, and Swati are full of lacunas such as shallowness, thoughtlessness, craze for name, fame and glamour. Some of them have lust and some others are lured by economic gains. All of them seem to be caricatures. De depicts their weaknesses authentically, so they appear to be life-like characters. Shobha De intends to heal the injuries of female psyche in her imaginative fictional world through free and frank treatment of sex in marital bliss and sex as a curse in premarital or post-marital life. However, her heroines fight for the equality in a dogmatic and patriarchal Indian society.

Shobha De is much criticized for the presentation of women who wander about indulging in free sex, and living fashionable and wealthy life, but she in no way seems to support the way of life adopted by these so-called modern women. On the contrary, she shows her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour in a clear and effective way. The misunderstanding regarding her feminist stance possibly can be associated with her presentation of women who indulge in uninhibited sex and unusual social activities.

The recurring depiction of these women's behaviour and the minute details related to the sex act experienced by these women falsely create the impression that De is suggesting their life style as a model for women to experience real happiness, total freedom and an independent existence. But a careful study of her novels reveals the hidden motive in depiction of such kind of a bizarre life. It cannot be ascertained from the pronounced statements of her characters or from the activities in which these women participate. It may be deduced from the ultimate fate they are condemned to as a result of their indulgence in unusual activities and deviant behaviour.

In this respect, Anjali, Aasha Rani, Sudha Rani, Meenakshiyengar, Noor, Swati, and all the other former schoolmates in *Snapshots* are the best examples. In the end they all suffer because of their deviant behaviour. Thus the types of women and their behaviour that readers find in De's fiction confirm the post-modernist nature of her perspective. There is no essential category of woman to which her women characters belong. In her novels she rather accommodates and depicts a variety of women with no category to be all inclusive or absolute. There are not only traditional and modern women that figure in her fictional world but also women representing lesbians, middle-class women, women cloning male behaviour. The novelist does not project any category of women or perspective to be the ultimate.

Thus from the foregoing study of Shobha De's novels it can be concluded that though De is criticized, as 'pornqueen of pulp fiction', 'the soft porn star', the writer of the 'bodice ripper', or the 'Jackie Collins' etc., she is definitely a writer with a purpose. In reply to above criticism she makes a sarcastic comment thus "Had my books been written by a man they would have been called 'provocative' or even 'courageous'. But because it is a woman who is writing, they become pornography". Taking this into consideration, it can be asserted that one may love Shobha De or hate her but one cannot ignore her because she is the celebrity writer who has contributed in her own distinct way to Indian novel in English.

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