

Shobha De's Urban Indian Women - A Probe into Women's PsycheG.Gayathiri Devi¹, S.N.Mahalakshmi²¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, R.M.D. Engineering College, Tamil Nadu, 601206, India² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Anna University Regional Centre, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India
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Abstract: Traditional society focuses women to sacrifice their individuality to lead a life serving the men folk. Vast majority of Indian women silently suffer for ages at the hands of establishment, with no means of expressing or fulfilling their secret wishes. But modern women have their own room, aspirations, dreams and desires. This urge has made them redefine the life style which provides an individual sustenance as well as scope for liberation and self-discovery. Many women writers have portrayed this changing image of women and Shobha De's works are significant with unique style and reality. This study is an attempt to analyse how Shobha De probes deep into the inner feeling of women characters and brings out how the women characters finally freed themselves from the clutches of male dominance and social norms to emerge as a free women. Thus in the present Indian scenario, the study of her novels surely helps to realise the changing attitude of modern women.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of women's writing in India during the last quarter of the nineteenth century is of great significance, in the sense that it makes the birth of an era that promises a new deal for the Indian women. Indian fiction, since its origin more than a hundred years ago, has dealt with the position of women in society. Indian women writers in the recent decades have produced abundant literary output, their focus of writing being on gender and the role of women in society. These writers probe into human relationship since this is closely concerned with mind and heart.

The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English literature. Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to the Indian literature. It is noticed that women writers incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings.

In 1990's, new and promising writers continued to crop up, established writers continued to contribute significantly to the growing genre. Each writer in their own way has tried to convey their thoughts in a distinct personal voice, women writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural principles that constrained their liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women.

In ancient India, women were denied the right to education. As Beauvoir comments "This has always been a man's world... History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set-up against her and

she has been definitely established as the other"(Beauvoir, 1980). When women become educated, they started asserting their own point of view and female writing emerged as the social movement against their political, economical and socio-cultural discrimination. Thus in recent days, women writers have characterised and portrayed the psychic mind of Indian women.

From the ancient days, all areas of social prominence were entirely owned by men. Women were traditionally expected to serve their husbands without being autonomous. All women are expected to play an important role in their family and she is not supposed to interfere in any other social issues. She is either treated as a beast of burden or an object of pleasure. In a patriarchal society like India, women have waited patiently for solutions to their problems and suppressions. But no such solutions are offered by men. So, women themselves started asking for their rights. Therefore, the quest for identity and freedom has become a very dominant theme in literature.

Shobha De is a well-known woman novelist of the twenty-first century. Her career started with the unplanned entry as a teenager into the glamorous world of modelling, then columnist, TV script writer and author. Shobha De is a daring and innovative novelist with an original sense and vibrant richness. She is deeply fascinated to explore the present day scenario through the central characters in the novels.

Today, the status of women has changed due to the economic development and political participation. Most of the urban women are struggling to create a distinct "self" or an identity within their family and beyond it. Shobha De in her novels has made attempts

to exhibit the emotional lives of women, the intricate fabric of human relationships and depicted extensively about the innermost experiences of women. Singh and Gupta say that “Shobha expects a woman to be aware of her identity as a human being and think for herself. Woman should be an independent identity by being aware of the choices open to her” (Singh and Gupta, 2003).

Thus, Shobha De proves to be the observer of the society existing around her, perceiving everything minutely and presents the contemporary attitude of modern women with her unique style.

This study is an attempt to exhibit how Shobha De’s fictional world portrays a need to demolish the traditional images of women imposed by patriarchal society by portraying the inner psyche of young Indian women, whose emotions and feelings are not recognised by others.

2. Patriarchal Domination

Patriarchal dominance is well exhibited in her novel “Second Thought”. The arranged matrimony between Ranjan Malik and Maya is doomed to failure because of their entirely different attitudes to life. In spite of his western upbringing, he wants to lead a traditional life and he expects the same from his wife. Maya on the other hand, fails to accept his (wish) and as a freedom-loving girl craves to lead a more free life. She desires to be an ideal wife but Ranjan, completely obsessed with his mother, fails to understand his wife’s needs and her desire for freedom.

Ranjan expects her to do all the house-work and sarcastically remarks when she fails to do it perfectly. Often Ranjan reminds her of ‘tradition’ and of the “law laid down in our shastras” (ST, 352).

When Maya wants to pursue a career in textile designing after marriage, Ranjan rejects the plan. Behind this decision lies Ranjan’s ego and he projects himself as the lord and master. Maya has to abide by his whims and fancies whether she likes it or not. He always reminds her of her duties as a married woman. He says: “...a housewife’s duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top. That is where her true happiness lies. You’ve seen my mother’s house – learn from her” (ST, 56). Thus the contrasting attitudes make her feel her life as a discontented one. That is why Maya always ponders as “Modern life is so lonely. So lonely. Nobody to talk to. No body to share anything with” (ST, 91).

Ranjan’s responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a decent house and four square meals a day. “As far as he was concerned, he had redeemed his pledge” (ST, 368). It is up to Maya to accept or reject it. Ranjan tries to control his wife, locks STD facility on phone

and has full control even on the use of the air conditioner. She cannot share her feelings with any one; even she cannot bear any child because of her husband’s lack of interest in physical-gratification and on top of that, she has nothing creative to do in that city.

Neb also says that “Maya has to experience the pangs of loneliness, isolation and a feeling of being a non person only due to the unresponsive, selfish and suppressive nature of her husband” (Neb, 2003).

She was not permitted to do anything of her own except staying at home and fulfilling her husband’s desire. So, the lonely and depressed Maya developed an explosive and passionate friendship with a college going neighbour, Nikhil. Later her relationship with him ultimately culminated in extra-marital sexual intimacy. The hopeless emptiness of her married life is well expressed as “Now here we are, locked together in a relationship that didn’t satisfy either of us. He is very obviously longed to be on his own, leading the life he had become so accustomed as a student and then as a promising bank executive living by himself. And I longed for the perfect romantic companion-if such a creature existed at all outside my imagination” (ST, 252).

Modern women are educated and trendy in their ways and yet are condemned to a traditionally docile and mild existence within the marital set-up. The novel “Sisters” also gives a clear picture of patriarchal dominance. In this novel, Mikki strives continuously to love and win her own man but Binny her husband behaves totally against his wife’s expectations. She is interested to assist him in business but is denied and her husband tells her “Your job is to look beautiful... buy clothes, buy jewellery. Go to the beauty parlour. Play bridge, learn golf. Attend cooking class. But no question” (Sis, 116). Though educated in America and progressive in thinking and behaviour, Mikki loves Binny from the core of her heart, leaves her business to become a dutiful and devoted wife. She represents a typical traditional wife by completely submitting herself to her husband.

But Binny on the contrary, has a mistress, family and children. He marries Mikki to keep up his pride and image in the society. He also deprives his wife of motherhood compels her to undergo abortion and threatens her that otherwise he would divorce her. Binny fails to realise her wife’s emotional feelings. She was denied individuality, independence and emotional security.

The fraudulent attitudes of Binny are reflected in his statements: “You are Binny Malhotra’s wife: And you better start behaving like her. In our family women are trained to obey their

husbands. Thank your stars you don't have a mother-in-law to please. You will never, I repeat, never, question me... or complain. You have nothing to complain about-got that? Your life is perfect. You have everything ... everything. Where I go, I do, what I do, when and with whom is my business. I will spend as much time with you as I choose to" (Sis, 116).

She was "willing to compromise her own life if it meant he'd notice her, listen to her, acknowledge her existence" (Sis, 140). She does not want to leave Binny as she confides in her friend Amy: "Trouble is, I love the man. Call me a door-mat, a slave, a victim, anything. But I feel hopeless and helpless. It is as if I've forgotten what pride is... or even was. He can and does trample all over me" (Sis, 497). On the contrary, her marital life is shattered when Binny suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. But she begs and pleads innocently " Binny, Why? Why are you doing this? What have I done? I love you. Only you. I'm innocent. Please Binny.... I can't live without you" (Sis, 141).

Shobha de's women do not seem to suffer from social problems. But they are agitated and irritated due to the sense of presumed male superiority. They resist the male attitude that decides and defines their existence and expects them to mould their life according to male desires.

3. Shobha's Women - an Intrepid

In recent days, the divine institution of marriage and husband-wife relationship has crumbled down in the country. The changes in the husband and wife relationship have certainly exerted tremendous impact on Indian life style and attitude of modern urban Indian women.

Shobha De's women do not believe in suffering submissively, they use all the means to achieve joy and success in life.

Karuna in 'Socialite Evenings' from her childhood protested against the traditional path of etiquette and manners. She says:

"In the house-not jumping at the sound of father's voice booming out some command. Not putting my stuff away after school. Leaving a dirty thali on the dining table, whistling in the bath room, back combing and teasing my hair, refusing to fetch trays of tea for boring visitors, being cheeky with relatives and, mainly, not cowering in the presence of elders" (SE, 6-7).

Naturally, when she grew up, her urge to lead a luxury life makes her develop a friendship with Charlie and associate, herself with ad agency she becomes a model against her father's will. Later, she meets Anjali, a prominent socialite and the wife of a wealthy play boy. She is an independent and beautiful

rich lady. Karuna wants to enter in to fashion world like Anjali to fulfil all her desires.

Karuna married a rich business man but her marriage is a complete failure as she has only formal relationship with her husband. The relationship between them is totally deprived of mutual understanding, love and affection. Their meaningless marital relationship is expressed in her words.

"You really make me sick. I think our marriage was over the day our awful honeymoon started. We have got nothing going. I don't love you-never have. As for you-I really don't know to this day why you chose to marry me. I don't think you even know who you married. You don't have a clue what sort of a woman I am. I am tired of your smugness, your irritating mannerisms, the way you take me for granted and expect me to fall into overall scheme of things... so just get off my back" (SE, 176-177).

Anjali, Karuna's friend in "Socialite Evenings" (and one time mentor) epitomizes the concept of marriage prevailing in the rich class. The dubious factors instrumental in her marriage set the tone of her marriage and that of other marriages in the novel. Anjali, not interested in studies, has keenly wanted to get rid of her middle-class background. She is a pretty, young girl, interested in seeing places and meeting people. So, like other beautiful and smart young girls of her time, she had joined Air India as a hostess. Abe (Abba Tyabjee) had been an "experienced rake with a wild reputation" (SE, 6). Something about Anjali's almost frigid demeanor had attracted him and he married her.

Marriage and family are the means used by society to control promiscuous sex and dissipation of man's energy which could be directed and used in many other useful channels, without at the same time, suppressing sex", (Pandharinath, 1958). But marriage, in no way, puts any restraint on Anjali's and Abe's respective sexual orgies. Abe has some regulars with whom he sleeps, apart from the occasional pick-ups. No question is aroused by Anjali because she is quite preoccupied with her own sexual encounters.

Anjali moves from one man to another and finally into a second marriage, all because of her desire to maintain the social status. Anjali's affair in the novel proves how she is ready to do anything for a sophisticated life. Her second marriage to the homo sexual Kumar is nothing but an exchange for 'the porche, emeralds, holidays in Biarritz, Shopping along the champs-Elysees, a villa in Ooty, parties every night, unlimited champagne – and the choice to pick my own bed-mate but only discreetly" (SE, 17).

Karuna develops an illegal relationship with Krish, an old friend of her husband. At one stage, Karuna openly admits her extra-marital relations just

in front of her husband. She tells her husband very frankly.

“I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him – in Venice. There is a good chance that I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. May be he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me. In which case it will really be *A Death in Venice*. You know by now that I am not the flighty sort. I don’t flirt at random like my other friends. I am steady and grounded. It is the Taurean in me that is surfacing these days. Treat this as a short-term mania that will wear itself out – and then we can go back to business as usual” (SE, 178).

Her open rebellion comes forth, when she points out that his failure to understand her as a woman is the real cause of her unusual behaviour.

She decided to lead a single life by giving divorce to her husband. After her divorce, her husband meets her and requests her to come back to him. Traditionally to this situation, woman ignores the cruelties of her husband. But Karuna’s response is shocking and unexpected because she firmly asks her husband to go away. She shouts at him as “And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don’t ever want to see you again. I let you in this time-but never again. I will call the cops if you try and invade my house in future. You are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie-I hope she has got a wax doll of yours. I will send her some extra pins to stick into it. Now take your frigging pipe and OUT” (SE, 256-57).

Traditional view of woman towards marriage is expressed by Aparna’s mother in the novel Snapshots: “Remember, a woman in our society is nothing without a husband. Study as much as you wish. Win prizes, get a good job. But don’t let all these things affect you, give you a big head. You may be the prime minister of India tomorrow, but when you come home, you automatically become your husband’s wife. If you forget that you are finished. Your marriage is finished” (SS, 24-25).

Karuna’s mother also expresses the same view and insists her to marry again believing that a woman cannot live alone. But Karuna refuses the idea and replies “But mother, why does security rest with man? I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don’t really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I am not answerable to anyone. I don’t feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage ... I can’t make any ‘sacrifices’- not now?” (SE, 268).

Shobha De’s women face hardships, exploitation and defect at different stages in their life but they are not discouraged. In “Sisters” when Mikki was sent out of her husband’s house. She has acquired

enough courage and strength to fight and challenge injustice.

Shobha De destroys the distorted and deteriorated image of woman and her female characters establish extra-marital affairs to get rid of their marital boredom. Marriage for them is just a matter of convenience, completely devoid of an emotional attachment.

That is why when Maya in “Second Thought” felt bored of her lonely and dominated life. She boldly develops an extra marital relationship with her neighbour knowing clearly that the relationship will not long last and if it comes to light, the consequences would be worse.

The main intention of the upper-class women is to enjoy life. They pay no attention to the norms of the traditional society and the joint family system. They break the social norms and the moral codes and simultaneously keep the mother-in-law away and tame the husband. In this regard, Reema’s advice to Surekha is worth considerable “You just have to assert yourself once. Once your husband becomes a hundred percent dependent on you, he won’t look elsewhere. Men like their comforts. And men are spoilt babies. Feed them well. Fuck them regularly and sit tight. That is the way to keep them. Control them. The rest is easy. Believe me-I was in your shoes not so long ago” (SS, 151).

Thus the novelist presents the attitude of modern women having courage to revolt and refuse being puppets in the hands of men in the name of tradition and society. Shobha De’s portrayal of this unique and distinctive contemporary reality makes her different from other Indian women novelists.

4. Sexual Liberation

Women in Shobha De’s novels have different thinking and want to create a world of their own. They seldom show any interest in family affairs, relatives and domestic affairs. They readily discuss professional life, business matters and matters related to sex and sexual behaviour. The concept of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a tremendous change in modern Indian society. Her women are ready to enjoy their life through physical consummation of love before and after marriage and even outside marriage. The kind of change that marks the modern women’s attitude is best reflected in the characters of ‘Snapshots’.

The six women in the novel freely indulge in talking about their past as well as present love-affairs, pre and post-marital relationships of their choice. These women feel free to discuss their affairs with men, knowing well that at times some of them are being enjoyed by the same man. It is through their behaviour and conversation that the novelist throws

significant light on the predicament of women in India.

They speak about both love and sex frankly in public. Swati's views on love and sex are expressed as: "Sex isn't filthy, our minds make it so. Look at Khajurho, Konark... Have any of you studied the Kamasutra? Fascinating. It is a pity we got brain-washed by some frustrated, repressed idiots. I think sex is a celebration-the highest form of religion" (SS, 164).

There is a great deal of sexual freedom in her women if not sexual promiscuity, even marriage does not curtail the sexual freedom in her women. This is well expressed in the words of the protagonists, Reema in "Snap Shots" remarks: "Imagine not knowing any other body, any other feeling, any other sensation. Forever, sounds terrible. Like eating dal-chaval day in and day out" (SS, 152). Their sexual behavior turns out to be amoral and in many cases even abnormal. To Anjali of Socialite Evenings, "this is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me," She declares, "This is the experience I've been waiting for" (SE, 78, 96).

Shobha de's women discuss and practice sex with unusual candor. In Snap Shots, Swati regards sex as a hobby, "for some it can be an all-consuming one. For others, a passing fancy" (SS, 164). She also expresses that I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, chastity. It's pathetic (SS, 165).

Alisha in "Sisters" voices the author's own desire of liberation in sexual matters. She shrugs aside the sexual norms and runs after the desire of body without any social or moral inhibitions.

Dr.Kurien's feelings of disapproval against Alisha show the attitude and behavior of rich contemporary women of India. He blurts that "for women like you-men are playthings. Today you want to breakup my marriage. Tomorrow you'll get bored and move on to some other man. Where will that leave me?" (Sis, 526). Dr.Kurien expresses a similar idea as he utters while having sex with her : "all the rich women are the same-you want more all the time. Nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all... it's free" (Sis, 541).

5. Conclusion

Shobha De presents the vital reality and makes us aware of the changing attitude of urban modern women of traditional India. She has created imaginative reconstruction of sordid reality which she has observed in big metropolises that makes her fictional world unique and authentic. For her female characters, their husbands leads them to establish extra-marital relationships, some accept signal hood

as a way of life whereas the others accept the mode of compromise.

The painful existences of women character form the major part of De's novels but, her ultimate consideration is to show these women's indomitable courage to fight against the patriarchal hegemony. "Shobha De's women revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds, be it business or sexual spheres. In a sense, she is the fore runner of the emerging Indian women with her liberated womanhood" (Pushpalata, 2000).

Unlike the traditional women, De's women never think of suicide as a solution to their sufferings instead, they turn rebellious. The novelist also highlights the lack of moral values in the contemporary society. This is reflected in their decision of not to have children because they look at them as a lifelong responsibility. These women also use sex as calculated strategy to gain social and financial benefits.

In the contemporary scenario there are many women writers who, through their writings, have been successful in projecting the urge for social equality. But being a very bold and aggressive writer of the post-modern era, Shobha De is dared to explore the hidden realities of the cosmopolitan life. Her popularity as a writer chiefly rests on her intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems.

Thus Shobha De novels indicate the emergence of a new woman curious to revolt against the traditional moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system.

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