
THE ANDROGYNOUS WORLD OF NEW WOMEN IN THE FICTIONS OF SHOBHAA DE'

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INTRODUCTION

Shobhaa 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 aspects of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular is really wonderful. The orthodox people in India criticize her for her open discussion of sexual matters. But her fiction has got tremendous response not only from several European countries but all over 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. 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 Shobhaa 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. Shobhaa De' 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." [1]. Largely speaking, Indian fiction depicts three kinds of woman, first the poor women, belonging mostly to the rural class, portrayed by writers like Kamala Markandaya 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 Gokhle and Shobhaa De'. 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. Shobhaa De's female

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protagonists are remarkable when measured against men. In one of the article of Madhu Jain, 'A protest against the patriarchal in Shobhaa De's work', her concept is very clear. She says, "The man-woman's complementary image has been completely shattered in her novels." [2]

Shobhaa De' burst upon the literary scene with her best-seller 'Socialite Evenings' in 1988, which was followed by 'Starry Nights' in 1990, 'Sisters' and 'Strange Obsession' in 1992, 'Sultry Days' in 1994, 'Snapshots' on 1995 and 'Second Thoughts' in 1996. The popularity of Shobhaa De's novels is due to their contents, her mastery over the art of storytelling and her use of language. These novels are set in the glittering backdrop of Mumbai's social circle where men and women lead luxurious but reckless lives, throwing away all traditional and moral inhibitions of the conservative Indian society. Her women are obsessed with aspiration for wealth, power and fame. They acquire an image of the traditional Indian women who devote their lifetime in the service of their husbands and family. These women are highly challenging, educated and assertive. They are out to tell men that whatever they do, they too are entitled to do the same. They go in for high flying careers like modeling, movies, high power business, journalism and advertising. They keep a string of men tied under their belts, so that when one fails to live up to their expectations, they can move on to the next one. In fact, her novels seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. Shobhaa De' began her career as a journalist. She claims to be "a pioneer in the field of popular fiction" writing. She also claims to be "among the first to explore the world of the urban woman in India" [3] through her novels and essays.

Shobhaa De's fictional world has aroused curiosity and interest on the one hand and downright rejection and denunciation on the other. The works of this "high priestess of gossip and innuendo" [4] has been regarded as "equivalent of Hindi films with their peephole voyeurism." [5] When first published, Shobhaa De's novels evoked hostile reviews. "Socialite Evenings" for example, was branded as a "high society potpourri, bland and banal" .bristling with orgy -laced parties and 'voyeuristic servings of souped-up, four wheel drive-sex-in-all-direction' [6]. Another reviewer found it 'choked with listless lust' and criticized its "witless lust" and criticized its "witless dialogue". "Starry Night" which with its brazen portrayal of sex and 'exploitation' steals a march over the earlier novel, was described as" confession of man-eater. Despite their titillating details, what Shobhaa De's a novel indicate is the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to defy the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system? Her novels are not

just a series of ‘bodice ripper, they are serious attempts at ‘discovering India through Indian eyes’. One may not like everything in De’s fiction, but her treatment of the contemporary urban Indian woman’s challenges, predicament, values and life-style is surely not without significance. De herself would consider the treatment of the identity of woman as the most significant contribution made by her work. Shobhaa De’s novel “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 [7]’. These friends had drifted away in due course and ‘disintegrated through marriages, transfers and unshared interests.’ [8]

Shobhaa 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. This new woman is keen to get the equal powers like men as De’ writes – “It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power. Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and explored for the furtherance of overall human development. The very concept of sexes locked in eternal battle is negative and destructive. When one talks of Shakti unleashed, one also remembers the two connotations of Shakti, the destructive avtaar is as potent as the creative one. It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that leads to creative and dynamic harmony.” [9]

But men, she says, are not willing to accept it and “Many men expressed their anxiety over the changed power equation.” [10]

“Socialite Evenings” gives us the picture of the marginalization of Indian women at the hands of their husbands. Shobhaa De’s is the picture of women not only as protagonists but also as motivating factors in society, initiating and regulating their own lives as well as the lives of others in the voluptuously, fascinating world of Bombayites, its enticing glitter and glamour. De’ says the average Indian woman’s conjugal life is “an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left” and marriage is “like a skin allergy, an irritant”. But she is not afraid to face this irritant, this allergy. She boldly and defiantly encounters it. Karuna in this novel never treats her husband as her partner deserving due attention and care. His presence is minimized as much as possible. The name of the husband is not revealed throughout the novel; only the word ‘He’ is used to refer to him. After divorcing her husband, her mother insists her to remarry, but she refuses by saying, “But mother, why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I

look after myself. 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'm not answerable to anyone; I don't feel like complicating my life, by getting into a second marriage." [11]

De' realizes "Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is just something to get used to" [12]. She gets used to this stereotyped social institution in the course of time. She detests the stand of fish and callous attitude of the husbands who often kept themselves busy in drub monotonous activities like reading the business pages of "The Times of India". But despite their laxities, a husband was above all, a sheltering tree, a rock to the wife. They were not wholly bad or evil and the wife as a woman was only a peripheral being.

Significantly enough, the term 'power' and its synonyms have been reiteratively used in 'Snapshots'.

"Who would know about the power game, 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 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." [13]

The most noticeable aspect of her writing in her vehement approach towards woman's problems. Her entire focus is to present her work more realistic considered as an excellent complement in the realm of popular fiction writing. Her work is a revolt against society and social norms laid down to under- estimate woman. Her woman is trying to seek self fulfillment through self-actualization. The new women are out to carve out an identity of her own. She is little willing to live within the four walls of the house. She wants to move out of it and explore new horizons. She ventures to take up high-flying, well-paid jobs. Until recently a woman however well-educated she might have been had to be content with socially acceptable jobs like teaching, medicine, law, etc. But now her job preferences have changed. De's women are in modeling, films, advertising, journalism, business, etc. De's intention is to reconstruct this established social theory about woman. She wishes that man has to come to know woman's power as a destructive one. She has designed an atmosphere where woman is not living as a victim but a victor. In her works, she has advocated rebellious sort of woman ready to revolt against established social taboos which tie her to behave as passive one and always be subjugated by man's authority. A well known critic Janaki Ramchandra, rightly comments about Shobhaa De' "You may love or hate her, but it is difficult to ignore it." [14]

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