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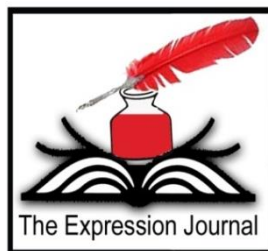
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Peripatetic Pleasures and Hedonistic Pursuits of New Women in Shobha De's *Snapshots*

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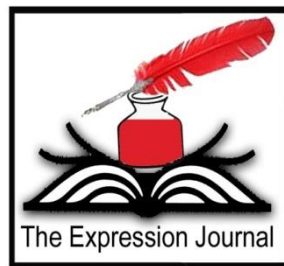
Abstract

Shobha De's childhood name was Shobha Rajadhyaksha. She is known as a famous novelist, socialite, editor, and columnist. She was born on January 7, 1947, in Girgaon, Mumbai, Maharashtra, in a Goud Saraswat Brahmin family. She studied at Queen Mary School, Mumbai, and later St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. She worked as a model for some years and after that, she became a journalist. She married Dilip De in 1984 and has two children; her husband also had two children from his previous marriage. Shobha De has written a large corpus of works, mainly novels, such as *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1989), *Sisters* (1992), *Uncertain Liaisons* (1993), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Shooting from the Hip* (1994), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Snapshots* (1995), *Second Thoughts* (1996), *Selective Memory* (1998), *Surviving Men* (1998), *Speedpost* (1999), *Spouse, Snapshots, Strange Obsession, Superstar India, Sandhya's Secret* (2009), *Shobha at Sixty* (2010), *Sethji* (2012), *Shobha: Never a Dull De* (2013), and *Small Betrayals* (2014). She has written her novels mainly on the experiences of Mumbai models. She has redefined feminism and treated the theme of love and sex frankly, due to which she has to face severe criticism from her readers. She has used Hinglish in her novels, and that is why her novels look closer to elite Mumbai women. This paper is an attempt to see how Shobha De has depicted the fallacious friendship of six women who meet after fifteen years and share their experiences frankly. Their meeting ends in a tragedy with a serious fight between Rashmi and Swati. Noor's suicide and her subsequent death turn their pleasure into pain.

Keywords

Shobha De, Snapshots, Mumbai Models, Indian Fiction, Feminism, New Woman, Sexuality, Pleasure, Patriarchy, Gender Discourse, Indian Writing in English.

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Shobha De is one of the pioneering women novelists from India who has depicted the dark aspects of Indian society. She is a staunch feminist who has always championed women's rights and liberation. A noted feminist, R.S. Pathak, calls her a feminist, writing that, "her works represent the ferociously militant phase of feminism in Indian English writing" (Pathak 145). Shobha De's women characters have tried to break patriarchal codes and demonstrate that women are not lagging behind in any field. Shobha De's novels unravel the hypocrisy, double-standards, corruption, and exploitation prevalent in the film industry. Her novels depict how women use their sexuality as a weapon to which men must surrender. It has been aptly stated about her, "She is undoubtedly the most reactionary novelist" (Dodiya 15).

On the other side, men also use women for their selfish motives. Shobha De has depicted how film directors exploit new models. These models, in turn, also use actors and directors to sign a movie or gain name and fame. Shobha De has written about how modern women are so frank and bold that the patriarchal structures cannot imprison them in their households like innocent women. They do not hesitate to sell their bodies for success. They engage in sensual pleasure with other men and women. Mary Wollstonecraft writes in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (99). Shobha De's bold themes related to sexual activities have led to her being called India's Jackie Collins. As Saxena writes, "She is often called India's Jackie Collins" (Saxena 259). Shobha De's novel, *Snapshot*, also revolves around the theme of women's liberation. It narrates how modern girls have extramarital affairs and do not listen to their parents in the pursuit of their dreams.

The novel narrates a get-together of six women who were students of Santa Maria High School fifteen years back. These six women—Swati, Rashmi, Reema, Surekha, Aparna, and Noor—share their personal experiences of their lives when they were together and after they got separated. Dr. Deepa Tyagi writes in her paper, "The Feminist Upsurge in Shobha De's *Snapshots*," "The six women—Swati, Rashmi, Reema,

Surekha, Aparna and Noor of *Snapshots*—are stuck deep in their destructive impulses” (594). These women were curious to know about one another’s experiences, and finally, Swati suggests that Reema arrange this meeting at her house because Reema is rich enough to bear the expenses. These women are quite different and know well that they can use their sexuality as a tool to get their work done. Dr. A. Rama Subbiah also writes about these women characters of the novel, in “Apparent of New Woman in Shobha De’s *Snapshot*,” “*Snapshots* also gives a voice about the journey of six modern women characters who took sex as a weapon and fought for their power and supremacy and also went in search of their space or self-identity to attain equal balance in the family” (127).

Shobha De’s *Snapshots* (1995) reminds us about Akhilandeswari (Akhila) of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* (2001) who meets five other women so that she may know how important a man is in a woman’s life. The six women of *Ladies Coupé* are Akhila, Janaki, Margaret Paulraj, Prabha Devi, Sheela Vasudevan, and Marikolanthu. These women belong to different classes and backgrounds and share their mixed experiences, but in Shobha De’s *Snapshots*, most of the women belong to the middle or upper-middle class who speak about their strange and shocking experiences. As they have been together in school, they get a chance to know about them personally.

Aparna is a sex-starving and selfish woman who knows well how to get her things. When the novel opens, she is enjoying her weekend with her lover Prem, who loves to enjoy sex in public places. He suggests Aparna to have sex in the sea water for a different kind of experience, but Aparna is reluctant to do so because she is frightened of the monstrous waves of the sea, “It’s dangerous....have you seen the waves? Monstrous ones?” (2). But Prem tells her that she does not need to be frightened. He takes her in the water and he says, “Remove your bikini bottom. Keep one arm on my shoulder” (3). Thus, Shobha De has written how the modern youth does not hesitate from lovemaking at public places. They shun all their shame, and the strange thing is that both of them are married. Aparna’s husband Rohit has deserted her, and she is now enjoying her “dirty weekend” (7) with Prem on the Goa beach.

Aparna does not have cordial relationships with her husband Rohit. She finds that Rohit is selfish. Aparna’s mother tells her that all men are like this. They do not want to do anything themselves; rather, they want to get it done by others. She says, “Believe me—all men are just the same. And Indian husbands, the worst” (183). Simone de Beauvoir also writes in *The Second Sex*:

Man can think of himself without a woman. She cannot think of herself without a man. And she is simply what man decrees.... She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other. (16)

Aparna thinks that Rohit is just using her. When she says that she wants to have six children, Rohit tries to convince her that he is busy and it will spoil their enjoyment. He says, “Why do you want to spoil it all? This is perfect. I am enjoying life. I am busy... you are busy. Forget kids” (22). She remains obsessed with having kids, but Rohit says that he has no time for her stupid activities. He says, “There’s no time to fuck up” (22). She finds that Rohit does not love her at all; she calls him a big hypocrite. “The same old

double standards. The same hypocrisies" (24). He criticizes her for not bringing wine for him. He gets offended by her words and starts disliking her. He becomes a sadist and tortures her at bed. Shobha De writes about it, "That night he had been more physical than usual, hurting her in the bargain" (25). When Aparna starts crying in pain, he takes pleasure and reveals his real face. He says, "With you, it's not far enough. You need a real man... a real fuck. You need pain" (25). Swati Bridges seduces Rohit and adds poison to Aparna's married life.

The second character is Surekha, who calls herself "a fatty-bambola" (34). Her husband does not like her weight, and she has to remain in her house all the time because her husband does not allow her to go out. When Reema asks her whether she has ever been abroad, she replies:

"Forget India, say Bombay, I can't go anywhere. I have to stay home because of my mother-in-law. She's old, sick and can't be left alone. My husband doesn't like me to go anywhere leaving her at home. She doesn't want to travel anywhere. Only go for pilgrimages with other widows. Even this lunch was a problem." (85)

She has to take care of her aged and old mother-in-law as there is nobody else to look after her. She is a highly ambitious woman, but her family environment does not allow her to soar higher in her career. Dr. V. Uma Maheswari writes about Swati in her paper "Quest for Identity in Shobha De's Snapshots: A Study," "Swati, the most progressive and career-minded woman among the six school friends, is the most important character of the novel. She goes in quest for her identity until she achieves it. She is the most ambitious girl right from the beginning of her school days" (55). Swati is an independent woman who wants to enjoy with other friends at Reema's house in the meeting. That is why she says:

"Hey, come on gals, nobody's watching. Nobody will know. There aren't husbands around to spoil our fun. Or fathers, lovers, boyfriends. No men for a change. What a bloody relief. Let us have a party. Remember how it used to be in school? Everybody joined in. You can't refuse. Leave it to me. I'm the expert." (99)

Swati becomes highly ambitious and she wants to attract men so that she may take undue advantage of them. She is very bold. That is why she brags about her sexual conquests, "I can still get 'em all—any man, any age, any colour" (187). Dr. Kamlakar Mahadev Chavan writes in his paper, "Shobha De's *Snapshots: A Study of Urban Indian Women*" about Shobha De's women characters:

She introduces her women characters as bold, confident and revolutionary breaking all the traditional values. They are mostly independent, sometimes living with their husband, brothers and father. Still, they continue to maintain their independent status. "Morality" and "Virginity" are filthy words for them. They throw these words out of the window and enjoy their lives freely. She presents the real world of the Indian urban women through this novel. The aristocratic women break the traditions and social norms. They are rebellious. (219)

Reema is also another modern woman who marries her husband and stays with him just because he is busy. Her husband Ravi does not prevent her from enjoying her life and spending money. When all the friends meet at her home she declares, "I am too sexy" (91). Swati also says to break all the rules to enjoy fully. She says, "I am breaking

all the rules today. Summon a slave. It is champagne time. Come on gals, drink up, drink up. This is an occasion. The best. I haven't felt this exhilarated since I lost my virginity—and all of you know how, when, where and with whom that happened... Let's drink to fun. Fuck it! Let's just drink. I mean DRINK" (91). Shobha De has depicted how these women are sex-starved and it is explicit from their relationships with other men. Swati is also obsessed with "Too much dhokla and too much sex" (93).

Swati asks Reema whether her parents know about her affair with Raju. Reema tells her that they know nothing about it. She reveals, "I will be killed if my family finds out. My brothers will finish him off. I can't tell them. I can't tell anybody" (106). When Reema is in a relationship with Raju, and Swati wants to know why he is not ready to marry Reema now, Raju laughs and says, "Forget it, I didn't force her to do anything. She wanted to. She asked me to. She was the one who put my hand under her dress. She was the one who lay down first. She forced me to. She was hot, she would've even done it with a goat. And who knows who was responsible. Maybe it was me. But maybe it wasn't" (107). He says that he cannot marry her because he is still under age, "Marriage? Are you crazy? I am not even eighteen. We'll get arrested" (107). Reema was attracted to Raju, and that's why she enjoys her moments with him. When Swati asks Reema whether she loves Raju, Reema replies, "Love him? No, I didn't love him. But I was attracted to him. Very attracted. He was the first male I took notice of physically. More attracted..." (109). Swati also says to Reema that she is bringing new trends to Mumbai by having a relationship with Randhir. She says, "There's nothing unnatural about it. Come on, you can tell us. I believe it's the wrong thing in Delhi society to sleep with your husband's brother. Wow, Reema, maybe you'll start a similar trend in Bombay" (112).

Reema's husband Ravi does not love her, and he remains busy in his official works. She does not get any love from her insipid husband. She has to face disappointment even at her first night when her husband does not love her. He sleeps without paying attention to her. He says, "Let's sleep tonight. We'll do it tomorrow. Okay, darling. Don't mind, it's been a long day. I'm tired. Too much beer also" (117). Reema has to spend a sleepless night after her husband's sleeping. She gets restless and comes to know that her life will get disturbed. The same happens with her in future also. Their lovemaking becomes just like a duty and it was devoid of any love, "They'd slipped into duty-fucking without having fucked in the first place! She lay awake for hours beside her snoring husband. That night decided all the nights that followed" (117). When she feels very sad from this dull relationship, she starts having a sexual relationship with Ravi's brother Randhir who lived in the USA. She enjoys sex with him because he was more attractive than Ravi.

Randhir was different. Not good looking, but rakish. Flamboyantly dressed. His eyes fringed with lashes half-an-inch in length and so thick they looked mascaraed. His physique was stockier than his brother's but devoid of flab. He resembled a sturdy bull with a thick neck and wide shoulders. (113)

Reema was on the lookout for the opportunity to enjoy her time with Randhir in the absence of her husband. Shobha De has depicted their lovemaking in a wonderful manner. She depicts this scene frankly:

Her body was trembling as his big toe reached the target it sought. Randhir maneuvered his foot till his big toe and the one next to it caught the edge of her

panties and pushed it aside....She shut her eyes briefly as his big toe stabbed her, opened her, played with her, and tried to enter her. She felt the heel of her foot massaging her sensuously using just the right amount of pressure to bring her as close to orgasmic bliss as she'd ever known. (120–21)

Shobha De does not write indirectly like other women novelists. She is known for her frank and open narrative. Love, sex, and lust remain the central themes in her novels. In *Snapshots* also, she writes how Reema enjoys Randhir's company, "Reema shut her eyes and tentatively put her arms around her" (123). This shows the true nature of the modern Mumbai woman's psyche, that they do not leave any opportunity to enjoy sex. Premarital and extramarital affairs make Shobha's women characters happy.

Noor also has been depicted as a psycho woman who also falls in love with her own brother, Nawaz, whom she finds very attractive. It happens because her parents also lived separately and both were irresponsible parents having extramarital affairs. Noor's psyche also indicates that she is sick. Noor thinks that Nawaz is the heartbeat of many women. Shobha De narrates about her:

Women were attracted to him like bees to honey. He preferred the married ones with money. A princess had killed herself because of him. Another had claimed that Nawaz was the father of her son. An ageing movie star had left her devoted husband hoping Nawaz would marry her, and a Pakistani poet had dedicated a fat volume of romantic couplets to him. (60)

Swati is also an opportunist and when Juan proposes to her for marriage, she thinks that it is a wonderful opportunity because Juan is rich and she will enjoy a luxurious life with him. She was much attracted by his lavish and luxurious life, thinking that she will get financial security after their marriage. Juan was also crazy after her, "Swati kissed his mouth, his eyes, his throat, his navel and stopped. He could hear Juan groaning, begging. "Take me in your mouth again please" (210). He praises Swati for her beauty. He says, "Did you know you possess the greatest ass in the world" (211). Swati also makes Juan happy in the water. She starts stroking him till he hurts, "I've been a good girl for far too long now, darling. I want to be bad tonight. Wicked. Really, really wicked. Trust me. Let's celebrate. Let's take a hit each only this one time" (211). Juan drives Swati so crazy that she pleads with him for lovemaking, "She swung her legs over the side of the tub and begged of Juan to enter her, release her from the sweetness of the agony" (212).

Everything remains good after their marriage for some days. They go to South America for their honeymoon. She leaves her professional life and enjoys time with Juan. But Juan remains busy in his business activities and leaves her alone when he goes to Argentina. Swati thinks that her life has been monotonous and she thinks that her duty has remained just to please her husband. She admits it, "My career fell into pieces and I was virtually isolated from my friends and my life in England." (210). Juan was very clever and he gives her limited money. Though this money was sufficient to live a contented life, Swati thinks that her purpose behind this marriage was something else which Juan does not allow her. Swati narrates about it:

I got sufficient pocket money. But strictly no credit cards, no joint accounts and no access to Juan's real wealth. With my terrible habits, it didn't take me too long to blow it all up. And guess where most of it went? Straight up my nose! (211)

Swati does not remain satisfied with her life and she thinks that her identity has been dissolved. She feels like a caged bird at her home and thinks that only separation can give her some recognition and identity. S. Vijaya Kumari and Dr. N. Geethanjali also write in their paper, "Revolutionary Women in *Snapshots* of Shobha De," "The striking feature of this novel is that it breaks the traditional social perception that men can run the society in a better way. The six characters of this novel seem to disregard the male hegemony in their own way" (190).

The sixth character is Surekha who remains much close with Dolly. They are lesbians and declare that now women do not need a man, they are more happy with women than men. Shobha De has depicted this theme in her other novels also. Surekha's relationship with her schoolmate Dolly are "...intense, mutually-dependent camaraderie.... inextricably intertwined" (159). Noor says about Surekha, "Wasn't Surekha going around with Dolly? I remember catching them in the loo one afternoon. They had their hands up in each other's uniforms. And they were kissing on the lips. Surekha—do you still meet Dolly?" (163). Both Surekha and Dolly belong to different backgrounds and they knew it well that their family members and society will not accept this type of relationship. That is why they enjoy each other's company and call their relationship spiritual. "It is not what you people are thinking. Nobody will understand our relationships. It is... it is... spiritual. We must have had some connection in our last lives" (165). Surekha's husband pays all the bills for her and expects his matrimonial rights in return and there is nothing wrong in it. She tells, "He was merely the man who paid all the bills and demanded his conjugal rights periodically. He knew Surekha hated having sex with him—detested every coupling. But both of them were practical enough to realize that that was the ticket to keeping the marriage going" (169). She feels trapped because her mother-in-law also puts a surveillance on her. Dr. Bhavana Arora writes about Shobha De's women characters in her paper, "The Concept of 'New Woman' and Her Appearance in Shobha De's Select Novels," "Shobha De's women characters represent a true picture of the modern Indian woman. Female sexuality finds new dimensions, as women here are not contented with heterosexual relationships only" (136).

Conclusively, Shobha De's novel *Snapshots* is the description of the peripatetic pleasures and hedonistic pursuits of the new women who enjoy their life without patriarchal boundaries. The six women characters of this novel live under the illusion of freedom from social codes. These women cast off the barriers of marriage and motherhood and openly give vent to their sexual desires. They want to forge their identity by flouting patriarchal norms. In their pursuit of modernity and superficial pleasures, they forget morality, which puts them into a different category. The novel also depicts that women aren't victims of men; rather, men are the victims of women. Siddiqui Jabeen Rafiuddin also writes about this novel in his paper, "Fallacious Friendship in Shobha De's Novel *Snapshots*," "*Snapshots* exhibit an urban society where men stand on the outer boundary and women contest for power" (57).

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