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UNWOMANLY WOMEN IN SHOBHA DE'S SELECT NOVELS

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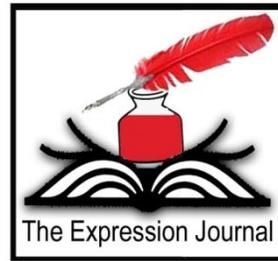
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Abstract

Present paper tries to analyze the pictures of revolt and resistance how women characters in Shobha De's novels seem unwomanly. The word 'unwomanly' has been used intentionally just to denote not submissive, shy, oppressed and tyrannized images of women as is general concept about women by the patriarchal heads. Shobha De is a novelist who has penned down the real pictures of women in metro city, Mumbai. Unlike the women of the countryside who have to live under the dominance of patriarchal chains, the women in metro cities don't feel themselves bounded with such codes of conduct and they want to enjoy their lives the way they like. For them, life is just to enjoy and whosoever comes in their way, they discard that. They treat sex as a human necessity and they want to have sex with multiple partners. Sex, for them is not a taboo. They think sex like food and they get bored if the same food is served on bed at night to satiate their bodily hungers and that's why they go for the extra-marital relationships and want to live the modern life-style free from any human chains of relationships.

Key-Words

Shobha De, Women, Resistance, Betrayal, Love, Lust.



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Introduction

Shobha De is an erotic novelist who is also known as India's 'Jackie Collins'. She was born on January 7, 1947 as Shobha Rajadhyaksha to the Saraswat Brahmin family of Maharashtra. She is a graduate from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. She is a super model, journalist, editor, columnist, T.V. script-writer, and social-commentator. She has written many books. Her novels are *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995) and *Second Thoughts* (1996). The themes of her novels are love, life, family, relationships, marriage, identity, sex, pleasure and lust. Presently, she is living with her second husband Dilip De with their children in one of the posh colonies of Mumbai. Most of her works deal with the different aspects of the aristocratic female society and their mental tumults. Her novels, according to Narinder Kumar Neb are the descriptions of the mental agonies of her female characters: "He Shobha De's novels largely explore the physical and mental agonies of female characters." (Neb 166)

Shobha De's novels have a large appeal and these novels are her voice to leave no stone unturned to change the man-made rules. Her novels have so wide range that they have been recognized by Bombay University. Narender Kumar Neb in the article "Shobha De: To Read or Not to Read" says: "It is uncharitable to think that Shobha de's novels have been recognized by the Bombay University without giving any consideration to literary merit." (Neb160) She has openly discussed the sex like Jackey Collins, Kamala Das, Shashi Brata, Philip Roth, and D. H. Lawrence. Narender Kumar Neb writes about the female sexuality in India. That's why she has also been a controversial writer due to her language and presentation of sex in her novels among the affluent class of Mumbai. She has focused on different

aspects of urban India. According to Narinder Kumar Neb: “De has mocked at the society ladies, their behavior and thoughts. She knows the frailties and frivolous concerns of this world.” (Neb 166)

She has also been actively involved in writing scripts for various TV soaps like ‘Swabhimaan’. Most of her books are the best sellers. Almost all women Indian writings are the voice of suppressed, subjugated and oppressed women inside the home and following the traditionalism and orthodoxy. Women emerge as a Chandi Devi against the cruel system of society in the novels of Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Amrita Pritam, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Cornalia Sorabji, Dilip Tiwana, Gayatri Devi, Gita Hariharan, Indira Goswami, Kamala Das, Kiran Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Mrinal Pande, Nayantara Sahgal, Namita Gokhale, Shudha Mazumdar, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De etc. The women in their works are no so silent sufferers that their voices will be hushed so easily rendering them powerless and speechless. According to Praveen and Dr. Kailash:

The early image of woman in Indian English Novel as a silent sufferer, an incarnation of patience and endurance has gradually been eroded. The woman portrayed by the Indian Feminist writers is a picture of an independent, free-thinking individual. (Kumar & Kailash 31)

They don’t have patience enough to tolerate whatever may happen with them. They are conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Ultimately, at least some of them raise their voice against this oppression whereas in ancient and medieval India the position of women remained very pathetic and they become a scapegoat due to their relegation to the marginal position in the society. Since antiquity women are subjugated, exploited, victimized and marginalized by the man dominated society. Women in these novels are silent sufferers in the society and they think they have neither right nor courage to challenge man-made patriarchal chains. That’s why they look for a chance to break these rules. Praveen Kumar and Dr. Kailash in their article “Status of Feminism in the Novels of Shobhaa De” comment, “Through her novels De has tried to shatter patriarchal hegemony.” (Kumar and Kailash 42) The heroines of Shobha De’s novels want to expose themselves different from the traditional women and they try their best to look glamorous by all means. They go to massage and beauty parlours. They go to gyms to lose their weight. They are almost all Bollywood heroines or models. Narinder Kumar Neb contends about Shobha De’s fiction, “Her fiction seems to be limited to the depiction of a particular segment of society having no sense of values or moral consideration.” (Neb 163)

Karuna, Asha Rani, Maya, Mikki etc. heroines try to present themselves in a different look and their domestic activities also not like traditional women. Marriage for them is not ‘a bond of seven births’; they fail to sustain it only for a single birth. Marriage, for them is a game to play with body and when they feel that they are not satisfied with their relations they easily divorce their husbands and live a liberated and independent life. They go for extramarital relationships to satisfy their bodily hungers. Having sex with another man except their husbands gives them pleasure.

New Faces of Women in the Novel *Socialite Evenings*

Socialite Evenings is Shobha De's first novel that is a picturesque depiction of elite society of Mumbai and it beautifully explores the lives of the high-demanding women who are not satisfied with their humdrum routine lives. They feel boredom in the affluent and well-to-do families where they get married and find no love in their married lives. Even the husbands keep them only for their status in the society and not for the sake of love and respect. In the novel *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna, the main protagonist and narrator is also in the same dull, drab and boring life and she has to while away her time by writing memoirs. Karuna is born in Satara in a middle-class Brahmin family and she has two sisters. Their shifting from towns to metropolis proves traumatic for her. After marriage also Karuna is not satisfied with her life like other gaudy and shining stars of Mumbai. The women of Mumbai have their different lives. They don't take time in marrying or divorcing, "Women it seemed for the first time could have control over their lives. The scene was changing even in Bombay. Women work, women married, women divorced and women remained single." (De 65)

Karuna is not satisfied with her married life. She has high dreams of her life and she lives in the life of fancy. As she is far away from the ground reality of life, her life proves a failure. She thinks that her husband is "unexciting, untutored." (De 65) Karuna is not ready to get married again and she considers marriage a burden for her. Their marriage is not successful because they both are selfish:

I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. I like and respect Girish. We share a lot of common interest. But I am not sure I'll make a good wife to him. Or he is a good husband to me. Perhaps we are both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any sacrifices – not now. (De 276)

Thus, neither Shobha De's women prove ideal wives for neither their husbands nor their husbands for their life-partners. Their marriage life is full of tensions which lead to break-up. Monika Chaudhary in her article "The Changing Face of New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De" says:

Shobha De has come up with her own aesthetic approach in her novels. Her aesthetics lies in her ability to bring out human values in her writings. Her talent also lies in her catchy, blunt and candid writings which hit the human heart and mind directly. Her novels represent the woman's challenge to the patriarchal society, that is, women are no longer doormats to be trode upon and dirtied. (Chaudhary 30)

Darkness of Starry Nights

Shobha De's another novel *Starry Nights* is a depiction of hollowness of the film city, Mumbai. Other female characters like Geetha Devi, Malini, Aasha Rani and Sudha also are dissatisfied. Asha Rani's

mother, Geetha Devi is abandoned by her husband to fight with poverty with her three daughters. This poverty drives these ladies to prostitution. Akshay's wife, Malini is also cheated by her husband. Akshay does not love her and he wants only sex from her and that also with variety. When Malini fails in it, he loses his interest in her and has his affairs in the outer world. Shobha De says that the marital life in the families of actors and actresses is not satisfactory. They have just outer charms and this life of flashlight is in fact a life of darkness where wives have the stories of sadism, mental and physical illness and humiliation. Wives are considered as commodities. Sudha, Aasha Rani's younger sister, is very selfish. She has no pricking conscience and she can stoop to any depth to get her work done by hook or by crook. After becoming a film star, she hardly cares her hysterical mother and does not bother About Appa. She is a highly ambitious girl who has to remorse when she is attempted to murder by setting fire on the road. However, she is somehow saved but she is sixty percent burnt. Then she repents and confesses,

God has punished me. It is nothing else but that I deserve it. I have been evil. I have sinned. I have done so much harm. Just let me dive." (De 232)

Asha Rani, the protagonist of *Starry Nights* also has to suffer since her childhood. She is deprived of parental love and affection in the utter poverty of her family. Her uncle becomes a cause of her traumatic experiences and her mother also drives her into a high class of prostitution into blue films so that she may get money because of Asha Rani. She uses her as a money making machine. Often tears roll down from her cheeks when she is forced to perform in porno session. If ever she protests, her mother hits her. She requests her mother to save her life but in vain, "Amma, please don't. I am sacred. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers?" (De 53) The life of Film City is outwardly a life of glamour but under this brightness there is 'dark darkness'. To sign for big budget movies with world-famous heroes was possible only if she readied herself to be used. Ultimately after these traumatic experiences of her life, she becomes a Bollywood actress to enjoy the blaze of flash bulbs. But she fails to forget the shallowness and meaninglessness of her life in this life full of showiness that provides her neither real joy and nor any contentment. In her article "*The Fiction of Shobha De*", Nisha Trivedi observes: "The glittering world of cinema is in reality so ruthless, so miserable that it can shatter the moral values and innocence of any human being. But Aasha survives and achieves success." (Trivedi 186)

Shattering of Dreams for High Aspirations *Strange Obsession*

Strange Obsession is novel like *Starry Nights* based on Bollywood dreams. It is a story of a young and beautiful girl named Amrita Aggrawal who goes to Mumbai for her career as a model. She has to undergo a tragic life in an effort to make her career as a heroine in Mumbai. The novel opens with the statement of a neighbour to Amrita's mother: "Mrs. Aggrawal, you are spoiling your daughter.

What nonsense this is! How can you allow such a young girl to go to Mumbai all by herself?" (De 1)

Amrita's mother pacifies her by saying that Amrita is no more a child and she is twenty years old. She meant to say that Amrita has grown young and can tackle all situations of life as a model. Amrita's decision to go to Mumbai is good but she does not know the wickedness of the people of this metro city. When Amrita is born she is so beautiful that her two elder brothers say, "She is so pretty. So perfect. She is going to be the most beautiful woman in the world (De 2). Amrita's father also comments about her, "The child is special" (De 2). It shows that she is very beautiful since she is born. Now she is a young girl of twenty with beautiful looks. She leaves Delhi for the bright lights of Bombay as a model but there was something else in her destiny. For some time of her arrival in Mumbai things are well for her. She tries hard to be a supermodel. One day she meets Minx who had a darker background.

She has dark plans for Amrita. She falls in the trap of Minx who is a lesbian and when she comes to know it is too late and she has to surrender ultimately in the face of circumstances. If her mother had acted upon the advice of her neighbour, Amrita's life could have been saved from destroying. Thus this novel portrays that woman needs some support from any quarter i.e. family, relationships or males as she is weak and anybody can play with her easily. She can cry, repent but that she has once lost can never be recovered – never. So she must know her limitation before taking any decision especially for her safety and chastity.

Dreams and Reality in *Second Thoughts*

The novel *Second Thoughts* (1996) describes a life of a very attractive young girl named Maya from Kolkata who comes to Bombay after getting married to Ranjan who is a bank executive and treats her a mere thing of use and discard. He neither cares for her needs nor her pains and gloominess. He is under this assumption that he is doing more than enough by giving her four squares meals and she should be obliged for it to him. Thus, Maya lives a life like a caged-bird in her own home. Her meeting with Nikhil, a college going boy, proves a turning point in her life. Maya's first encounter with Nikhil mesmerizes Maya. She says:

But Nikhil most definitely affected me and one part of me didn't approve. This was ridiculous – a newly married woman day dreaming about a neighbor's young son. (De 45)

Nikhil takes less interest in studies and more in doing flirt with women. One day he flirts her saying that she looks gorgeous in blue sari. That day onwards Maya pays more attention to her make-up. She wears fresh saris, combs beautifully and neatly puts sindoor on the parting of her forehead to show it to Nikhil. Maya is well aware that being a married woman she is violating the moral codes and social

rules but she cannot prevent herself from meeting Nikhil. She gets a good chance to go on an outing with Nikhil when her husband Ranjan is on ten days official tour. She is so excited and happy that day, "I was ready to jump on Nikhil's motorbike and say "goodbye" to my life without the slightest regret. The choice was frighteningly mine." (De 241)

This intimacy with Nikhil proves unforgettable for her. One day he comes to her house to tell that it is her birthday. Before she reacts he embraces her and then they both are engrossed in lovemaking, "But Nikhil's mouth covered mine gently. His eyes were shut and his hands were in my untidy hair with the bouquet getting caught in the tangles." (De 376) Then there starts a session of kisses that takes Maya distant from her real ugly world to a fancy land of love and romance. The description of the kiss has been done very beautifully in the novel:

It was a kiss that involved Nikhil's entire being. A kiss so focused, so complete. I surrendered to its soft urgency even though my mind was on mundanities like the washerwoman showing up earlier than usual. (376-77)

Shobha De's women are not timid .They don't merely live in dreams. They try their best to fulfill their dreams also at whatever cost. They have no fear from the society or their husbands. Monika Chaudhary says that De's women are realistic and bold:

It is easy to say that Shobha De's women are realistic to the core. She has successfully drawn the image of the new woman who resides in the aristocratic world of Indian high society. This image is not of the weak and submissive woman fearing her domination by her husband. (Chaudhary 32)

These moments remain unforgettable for Maya throughout her life and she describes these moments as the most wonderful, most fascinating and ever beautiful in her life. It is Nikhil who gives Maya a new start of her life with a rejuvenated self and empowers both her body and soul. Thus Maya has extramarital relationships to get her love and Nikhil was as if waiting for the green signal from her:

Nikhil had mastered the art of love making and was very composed and well acquainted with the Physical needs of a woman and to give her the pleasure. (De 379)

The scene of Indian arena of women has been completely changed and now women are becoming rebellious and outrageous. *India Calling* (1934) is an autobiography of Cornelia Sorabji who was the first female barrister in India and the first woman to Study in Oxford University. She opens the gate for Indian women to come out of their houses and fight for the cause of women and ultimately gets

successful in her efforts. Kamala Das' autobiography also depicts her life in fifty chapters from her age of four, her stringent relations with her husband, extramarital affairs and open discussion of sex. Shobha De's women revolt like Kamala Das or Cornelia Sarobji but their inclination is revolt is towards love, sex and beauty. They want sex not bothering the bondages of the society, having no consideration of caste, class or age. Thus, Shobha De women are not the passive women with tearful eyes. They believe in liberty, pleasure or multiple sexes before marriage and even after marriage. Sex is like food for them that gives them pleasure and a support to enjoy their lives. Narinder Kumar Neb's views on Shobha De's treatment of sex makes this point crystal clear:

De' treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behavior as a means of women's emancipation. But the reality is different and De's real concerns are rather otherwise. (Neb 163)

Shobha De's women do which is against the nature of traditional women. They do the activities of love and sex so free like men and discuss it in their daily conversation as if it has become a part and parcel of their life. That's why Shobha De's women have been called here 'unwomanly women'.

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