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## Multi-Facets of Women in Shobha De's *Snapshots* and *Starry Nights*

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### **Abstract:**

Shobha De makes an attempt to reveal the inner self of woman in the urban milieu. Her novels explore the reality concealed in the lives of women. She depicts a true picture of the new woman, unveiling different shades of her life, searching for identity in an absurd and oppressive world. She acknowledges the fighting spirit and rejuvenating consciousness of new woman. She provides substantial information about woman's struggle in the world of glamour. The present study aims at analyzing Shobha De's two novels *Snapshots* and *Starry Nights* from the realistic perspective with a view to show how she is reflecting and representing the multi facets of upper class women in metropolitan India.

### **Keywords: New women, Multi-facets, Love, Marriage, Sex, Feminism**

Indian Novel in English today has definitely carved a prominent place for itself in the literary world. It has silenced those voices that rebuked and debunked it in the early years of its infancy. In the evolution of this genre in India the role of women novelists cannot be ignored. They enriched the novel form both qualitatively and quantitatively. All the women novelists through their composition of fiction reflect their experiences, struggles and innumerable conflicts.

Shobha De, the novelist fought spiritedly against all the traditional beliefs and moral values denouncing them as out of has gradually turned into an explicit annoyance and finally took the shape of an open rebellion. Since the ancient age, women have written novels in plenty but their novels attempted pictures of life as it is seen through the eyes of men. But now Shobha De breaks this world of English fiction by shifting from man's angle to woman's angle and emphasis from the external to the internal world. The primary requisite of novelist is that she should be a good observer; that Shobha De is. So she added new dimension with the exquisite perceptions of men and matter. Her novels indicate the arrival of new Indian Women eager to defy rebelliously against the well entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. She has scaled new heights of success as an Indian woman "Who breaks through rigid barrier"

The present study aims at analyzing Shobha De's two novels and *Snapshots* and *Starry Nights* from the realistic perspective with a view to show how she is reflecting and representing the changed social reality of the lives of upper class women in metropolitan India. In these novels the majority of her characters, in the initial stage, assert their feminine identity through protest and

defiance but eventually end up accepting and embracing the traditional values of patriarchal society. Therefore, the conflict in her protagonists between traditional pull and desire for female autonomy frustrates the quest for wholeness and integrated selfhood.

In *Snapshots* all the characters experience this oscillation between customs and contemporary reality but it is only Swati who triumphs over customs and succeeds to bring revolution. Reema, Aparna, Noor, Rashmi and Surekha go against the constructed norms of the society but all of them had to pay a heavy price in one way or the other. Noor indulges in an incestuous relationship with her brother, Nawaz and eventually takes her own life. Rashmi's son could not be accepted by the society for he is the product of an unwed couple. Rashmi in spite of developing a series of relationships craves for a man who can anchor her. Surekha and Reema also experience the oscillation between the two poles: Reema is modern enough to have an illicit relationship with her brother-in-law but she is too traditional to allow her daughter to marry of her own choice. Similarly Surekha enjoys lesbian relationship with Dolly but is not bold enough to acknowledge it or go against the wishes of her mother-in-law and her husband. Bijay Kumar Das, while commenting on this, writes:

This is because these women are in a sense 'liberated' and belong to a particular class of Indian society. Having outgrown in recent years old norms of behavior they are no more prudes in public. The concept of morality arising out of love for one and the same person is out dated. They are given to the enjoyment of life through physical consummation of love before and after marriage and even outside marriage. The idea of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a sea change in modern society. Indian readers must not seek the prototypes of Sita or Draupadi in the contemporary society. (Das 98)

The novel is a story of emotional dynamics of six women - Aparna, Rashmi, Swati, Reema, Surekha and Noor. They are all trapped in a patriarchal Indian customs and try to come out of all the boundaries made by the customs to live liberated life.

*Snapshots* projects an urban society where men stand on the periphery and women battle for power and supremacy. The power-hungry female characters of the novel fly at each other's throat, invent schemes to control and dominate over the weaknesses of their so-called friends. Through the album of their life, Shobha de projects the convoluted or exhausted challenges, predicaments and values of these actors, often shocking and disgusting. The novel emblemizes woman power at its worst. (Adhikari 255)

The women have been friends of each other in their school days. They all get together at Reema's home, who has arranged the party on behalf of Swati. Swati lives abroad with her Christian husband who is also an eminent writer.

She has returned to Bombay after a long time. Swati is an anchor and produces T.V. programmes on subjects of current interests. She has come to India to document the status and life style of urban women. Though she discloses her purpose of visit quite late, she has informed Reema well in advance about her arrival. Reema is overjoyed to listen about her proposed visit. She informs all the rest about her home-coming and arranges a grand party at her home to celebrate the occasion. A few of them are hostile to meet and greet her initially but accept Reema's invitation just for sake of fun. The meeting attains lively colours when they start recalling their past which is still hovering over their present. As they go over the memories of their past, they accuse one another and grow hostile and the party ends with Noor's suicide.

The admirable thing in these women is that unpleasant situations in life fall to denigrate their spirits. Traditionally they are conditioned to be silently enduring mothers and wives, but rarely do they follow such values. They revolt against those constructing patriarchal norms. All of them are drastic, and feel no guilt or shame to contravene the border- lines of socially prescribe and mentally inscribed rules and dictates. According to Urbashi Barat, "Each one of the women is trapped by a patriarchal society and their own social conditioning into a situation from which there is no escape expect through a subterranean defiance of societal expectations" (Barat 246).

The women represent different kinds of urban women in India. It is through their behavior and conversation that the novelist throws significant light on the dilemma of women in India. The get-together of the six former school friends at Reema's house to recall their past is the central action of the novel. As they are meeting after years, they all talk freely about their past as well as present love-affairs. Their conversation undoubtedly reveals how these women are infatuated with sex and sensual enjoyment. Swati, the organizer of the get-together gets excited and the novelist describes the scene in these sensitive words:

Swati's face was swathed in smiles as she pretended she was a catwalk mannequin parading up and down, humming an MTV hit, 'I am too sexy'. Everybody laughed. Within seconds the atmosphere altered. Swati announced, '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.' (De 91)

This is how, the anger against men and relief for being alone in the absence of men makes these women free to enjoy life. It is the circle of women – women in company of women where no secrets are hidden. The women express their accusations against men in general and husbands in particular. Their behavior and lifestyle clearly shows the conflict between customs and contemporary reality. They are frustrated and it is due to their frustration that they often decide to have extra-marital relationships by breaking the customs of Indian society.

Shobha De's woman is no longer a scrubbing maid and a passive bed-partner. They pay no attention to the norms of the customized society and the joint family system. Without any vacillation 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 clearly shows the conflict between customs and contemporary reality:

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 lazy 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. (De 161)

The upper class women are no longer shy. They speak about both love and sex frankly and even publicly. Swati's views regarding love and sex are expressed thus:

'Sex isn't filthy', our minds make it so. Look at Khajuraho, Konark .... Have any of you studied the *Kama Sutra*? Fascinating. It is a pity we got brainwashed by some frustrated, repressed idiots. I think sex is a celebration– the highest form of religion. (De 176)

Most of the women in the novel except Noor are married early and are frustrated and bored with their husbands. So they seek new relationships outside marriage and challenge the patriarchal system. De projects the alluring images of the attractive, independent and highly professional women trying to control the power structure. It is the most important issue that she deals with in her novels. It is the longing to utter and direct the action and thinking of others which is topmost in human psychology.

De's novels stress the value of equality of power. Whenever this balance agitates, there is tension and pretence in society. However, Shobha De differs significantly from the other women novelists concerning her views about love, sex and marriage. Some of her women characters emerge as hypocrites because real life situation is not reflected in their life styles. Even they do not symbolize the whole female community in India. They are only from the urban society. They are not the ample but only the buttry members of fashionable Mumbai society.

Furthermore, De is very frank in unfolding sex and sexual acts. The novelist attempts to show a change which is taking place in the contemporary society. Each woman in the novel desires for power, enjoys power and fights to control power. The women realize that their power lies in their sexuality. In this context, sex no longer remains limited to the body rather it stands for power. Men do not want to control female sexuality just to satisfy their physical needs. Instead, their lust for female body signifies their urge to have power over women, even a brothel-owner like Champabai realizes this game of power, who says to Rashmi:

Never give yourself to any man for free. You know why? Men don't value anything they get so easily. That is why we are here: to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over women. 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 will kick you in the gut. (De 47)

The six friends in the novel are completely free from the traditional social customs and values. They disrespect male power totally by breaking the norms of conventional female behavior. They prove that things done by men can be done in a better way by women. They think that they are more competent than men both physically and intellectually. Naturally the women characters in *Snapshots* appear more powerful than their male foils. The men such as Rohit, Prem, Balbir, Raju and others fail to control women. It seems that Shobha De's women are empowered by their sexuality. They challenge the patriarchal culture by their free and frank sexual behavior.

Next, Shobha De's *Starry Nights*, the most controversial novel, is the story of the struggle and survival of a woman in a sex-starved society. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness. As a feminine novelist and journalist, she has marvelous understanding of the psyche of women and therefore, she explores the world of especially urban woman with all its overwhelming problems and challenges in her novel *Starry Nights*. In the novel *Starry Nights*, mainly three women characters, Geetha Devi, Malini, Aasha Rani, and Sudha's sufferings have been depicted with marvelous realism. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the applecart of pharisaical patriarchal order upside down. They retaliate, revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves. As Shobha De's women don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Struggling hard with hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tear-filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge the society to turn the tide in their favour. Brimming with hope and zeal, they lay hands on hope in starry nights of their life. Their crusade against slavery, oppression and exploitation is alarming. With powerful strokes of her narrative technique, Shobha De suggests in *Starry Nights* that consciously or unconsciously women have always fought for their identity but in modern times the mode of struggle has changed. Women break all the barriers to assert themselves but they still demand that what they have always desired, i.e., protection, love, care, compassion and understanding. Their journey no doubt is arduous but their indomitable will and undefeatable spirit compels them to carry on their struggle.

*Starry Nights* took the literary world by storm for its frank portrayal of sex and exploitation. Glittering world of Bombay cinema beckons many young girls, bubbling with ambition and lust for power and self. Before they achieve their goal, they have to pass through the dark tunnels of exploitation and never ending sufferings, which result in loneliness, frustration and disaster.

Shobha De realistically articulates the experience of the protagonist of the novel, Aasha Rani and other women characters like Geetha Devi, Sudha, Malini and Rita as manifestation of oppression in the chauvinistic society; they suffer in their lives at the hands of men in one-way or the other. First of all, Geetha Devi, mother of Aasha Rani, has suffered a lot as she was abandoned by her husband to fight with poverty and deprivation with three girls to rise. She had even to prostitute to continue dance lessons for Aasha Rani as well as to support the family.

Next the novel beautifully provides Akshay's wife Malini, who when cheated by her husband, came out of their homes, cry out loud and sack related women to win back her lost husbands at any cost. Malini's marriage, supposed to provide her with love, care and understanding, is a fiasco as it works only through sex. Akshay needs sex and also wants variety, therefore loses interest in Malini who can't fulfill his demands. Through Malini and others, the novelist seems to suggest that mostly actors in Film industry are unfaithful in their family life and therefore their wives have the stories of sadism, mental and physical cruelty and humiliation to tell. Wives are generally treated as commodities.

Thirdly, Sudha, Aasha Rani's younger sister, is different from Aasha Rani in the sense that she is very selfish. As she has no pricking conscience, she can stoop to any depth to axe her own grid. Once she becomes a star, she hardly cares hysterical mother and thinks about her family. She never bothers about heel chair Appa. But she also meets a horrifying disaster due to her inordinate ambition. She had borrowed heavily to launch a film for herself and Amar. Out of greed, she manipulated the accounts and reaped tragedy for herself. Her murder was attempted by setting fire on the road where she could be somehow saved to be admitted in the hospital with sixty percent burns. She realizes her mistake at last 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 die* (De, SN: 232)

Finally, Aasha Rani, the protagonist of *Starry Nights* is a suffering soul since her childhood. The very birth of Aasha Rani was a bitter agony. In her childhood, deprived of parental love, protection, closeness and emotional security, Aasha Rani had to face starvation and poverty. Owing to the lack of fatherly protection, she underwent traumatic experiences at the hands of her uncle. But she was most mercilessly used by her own mother, who instead of acting as her savior, further pushed her into hell to support her family. The girl, who didn't want to kill her conscience to break the barriers of morality, was forcibly made a money making machine in her youth. Tears roll down the cheeks of Aasha Rani, when she leaves for Bombay. Like a caged bird, she is forced to perform in porno session. If ever she resisted, her mother cruelly struck her.

Before porno session, she helplessly cries, protests and repeatedly requests amma to save her life. The moments still stand afresh in her memory. *Amma please don't. I am sacred. That horrible man. How can I take off my clothes in front of all these strangers* (De, SN: 53) Ironically, Aasha Rani is first

exploited by her own mother who opens for her gate to hell. Aasha Rani realizes that the world she had stepped in was very cruel. To sign for big banners with top most heroes, was possible only if she readied herself to be used.

Ultimately Aasha Rani becomes a perfect film star to enjoy the blaze of flash bulbs. But she never forgets the shallowness and meaninglessness of her life, devoid of real joy and contentment. Her aversion for people grows with each experience in the film industry. Aasha Rani's marriage proves that it cannot guarantee love and security to a woman because women are more sensitive, sentimental, and possessive as well as demanding. At every step of her life, Aasha Rani falls a victim to the nefarious designs of men as she thinks: *Whichever way one looked at it, there was a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman* (De, SN: 157)

However, Aasha Rani does not display a new sensibility to enable her to protest against male chauvinism. Grilled in the mill of exploitation, she lets herself be crushed in the multiple sex encounters. In *Starry Nights*, Shobha De articulates bitter realities of the life of women like Geetha Rani, Malini, Sudha and Aasha Rani through varied facets of feminism in keeping with contemporary feminist critical theories.

In conclusion, one can say that the female characters of Shobha De's novels are caught in the binary fix of customs and contemporary reality. And in their struggle to come out of this dilemma or to strike a balance between the two opposite pulls they end up by surrendering to the same codes against which they had risen. While portraying this dilemma of the feminine world, Shobha De, gives ample space to the female protagonists who out rightly rebut and reject such authoritative codes that try to subjugate and appropriate them to cultural constructs.

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