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New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De

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Abstract:

The women writers of Indian-English literature have provided many shades of urban and rural women, touching the different aspects of their life and society. Authors like Kamla Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamla Markandaya, Shobha De have tried to present the physical and psychological aspect of woman and started the movement of consciousness in female writers with more emphatic voice and boldness which we find in the writings of Shobha De. She has mixed response of Indian minds. Picaresque elements loom large in her fiction. In fact her novels seem to be a modernized version of the nineteenth century picaresque fiction. The picaroon in her fiction is a woman who wanders from place to place in search of more fulfilling experiences. She tries to shatter the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society, her characters moves from the Feminist towards the Female phase, i.e. from the stage of protest towards the process of self-discovery.

Keywords: Feminist, Picaresque, Picaroon, Self-Discovery.

“The situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all creatures finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.’

-Simon de Beauvoir

Indian-English literature has produced a galaxy of women writers touching various facets of women’s life. While writers like Kamla Das touch the physical aspect of human relationships, Anita Desai focus is on the psychological one. In Bharathi Mukherjee it is a question of identity. Thus the movement as mere which had started as mere ‘consciousness’ in writers like Kamala Markandaya, has now assumed a more emphatic voice in writers like Shobha De.

Shobha De, the very name evokes a mixed response in the Indian minds. Her advent upon the literay scene in 1988 with *Socialite Evenings*, followed by *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sisters*, *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1994), *Surviving Men* (1997) and many more works later, has created hullabaloo in the Indian literary scene. Popularly known as the Jackie Collins of India, her popularity lies in the contents, mastery over the art of storytelling and ease in her use of the language. Picaresque elements loom large in her fiction. In fact her novels seem a modernized version of the nineteenth century

picaresque fiction. The picaroon in her fiction is a woman who wanders from place to place in search of more fulfilling experiences. She explores the world of the urban women in India through her fiction. She tries to shatter the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society. Her protagonists do not remain static infixed parameters. If analyzed within the boundaries of Showalter, her characters moves from the Feminist towards the Female phase, i.e. from the stage of protest towards the process of self-discovery. As a writer of women centered fiction, Shobha De understands the fact that the most significant difference between man and woman lies in woman's sexuality. If a woman has to establish an indigenous identity of her own, she ought to shatter the economic, social, political and cultural barriers posited by various forces throughout the ages. Feminism is the belief in the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men, and from this point of view Shobha De stands for the New Woman-casual looking but ambitious, professional, focused and control.

Her women fashion and seek new selves and a fresh truth as their traditional paradigm of love; desire and romance are deconstructed by their experience of exploitative male chauvinist society. Images of romance and sexuality create a conflict in the social and cultural code of the old and the new society. Her first novel *Socialite Evening* (1989), presents some aspects of high society life of Mumbai. Karuna, a middle class girl becomes a star. Unhappy family life and divorce leave her battered and bruised, but she continues to fight for her identity and existence. Within her marriage she finds herself trapped and is exposed through her own satiric narratives. It is said that pangs of the conscience give way to sublime urges of the soul, even her extra marital affairs still hold some sort of hidden terrors for her but it is revelation and not so much the deed itself that confounds her; though she is still sacred of the word "adulteress". Though Karuna knew that such kind of affairs are labeled as crime legally, it still remains a leveler, and for her it appears as level down to the ground tensions that occur in the course of everyday life. I think that in this era of the globalization fever, there is an increase in number of people who regards such affairs as ventilators providing fresh air of sustenance to a soul being suffocated in unhappy surroundings caused by wrong choice and mismatched sense and sensibility.

"Occasional adultery, Mohan was convinced did not destroy a marriage; quite often it proved to be a cementing factor as in cases where the husband could not give his wife as much sex as she needed, or where the wife was frigid. It was silly to condemn adultery as sinful; it often saves marriages from collapsing. (p.50)

Shobha De has presented Karuna who does not want to play like the hoax any more. She has learnt from her male counterpart to conceal or reveals per convenience, not only this Divorce is no more a Death-Word for her, infact she has learnt to manage on her own and learnt to walk out or give a slip here and there rather squeeze the life out of a family life of pungent atmosphere where she has no identity, no choice whatsoever;

"Divorce Isn't such a dirty word anymore. I'm sure my mother-in-law would feel pretty relieved. Maybe the husband, too. I've always felt like such an impostor in the house." (p.52)

This shows that modern life has produced fractured individuals. People are becoming more and more isolated now, but the struggle for existence, the battle of survival is on its full

swing. As we can see Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*, she takes up writing her memoirs to escape humiliation or dejection perpetrated by failed marriage.

When it comes to survival and identity, the woman of Shobha De takes course to other ways, like in *Starry nights*, (1991) focuses on teenage girl Aasha Rani trapped in the showbiz society: a story of survival and the glamour of show biz are used in the novel. Aasha Rani, born in an Iyengar father and a supporting artist is the sole prop of her family ever since at the age of six, and ruthlessly pushes her into pornographic films at the age of twelve. During her teens Aasha is again thrown into the Mumbai film industry, and there she was exploited in multiple ways through various characters. In fact, we can say that the book is about a young girl who is 'sexexploited' by members of the shiny flecks world. Whether it is Kisanbhai Seth, Amirchand, Akshay, Abhijit, Linda or even her Appa, Amma and Sudha Rani, her ultimate aim is to use devious means to exploit the protagonist. It is to Kisanbhai that she speaks of her brazen childhood memories:

"You don't know about my childhood.....I never had anything to play with- no toys nothing." (P.229)

After her experience with Kisanbhai she understands that she is merely the first of her 'sexexploiter'. From then onwards her heart attains a state of nullification. Shobha de describes her physical and mental condition as: "after that experience.....she didn't even bother to look at the man's face or body. She just ceased to react. What difference does it make who he was and he did?" (p.248) the sexual encounter with Seth Amirchand presents the barbecue picture of the glamour society. Even her journalist friend Linda exploits her through a lesbian relationship. The only person who touches the heart is Akshay. Consequently when Akshay also turns away from her, she elopes with Abhijit to New Zealand, only to be deserted by him in an alien country. It is here that she meets Jamie Philips. Within a week they are married and a daughter Saasha is born to them. The joys of motherhood add a special glow to Aasha Rani's charm. Her visit to Bombay after a gap of five years alters the balance of her life. At the behest of her husband she agrees to re-enter the film world. Her heart is filled with a sense of gratitude as she looks back at the affection, warmth and security, and here again she found her identity, and said to Jay who had showered upon her wounded heart:

"Jay.....in a way you saved my life....I was sick of living. Sick of deception....And I too had lost my head and become a loose woman. You never questioned me about my past.....you showed me that another life was possible for women like me." (355)

Towards the end of the book we see her in a mood of reconciliation with the members of her family. Aasha Rani tries to revive her father's studios and also dreams of making her daughter the future 'golden girl' on the silver screen.

High stakes, ambition, lust and greed also form a part of our lives. De's *Small Betrayal* presents the woman in the driver's seat. Manisha, in the novel consistently discouraged Mohan's fantasies. Mohan falls in love with her and he thinks that she will also love him but in the end, we find that it was Manisha actually who decided to reject Mohan. Not only has this De made a bold and innovative attempt to portray lesbianism in *Strange*

Obsession. A gorgeous young super model Amrita Aggarwal, conquers the glamour world of Mumbai. She rises to the zenith, unaware of her female lover Minx (Meenakshi Iyengar) who helps her unobtrusively just for carnal pleasures, passion-quenching. Though forced to give in at times, Amrita passes through nightmarish experiences on account of the extreme demands of her unwelcome suitor who even traces the couple (Rakesh and Amrita) in the bridal suite of the Oberoi Hotel on the night of their wedding and even in the honeymoon cottage in the Nanital. De observes commendation for bringing out the woman to woman relationship in vivid detail with passions running through tumultuous weather and desperation to the finale of bringing about Minx's death under tragic circumstances. Actually she has not gone into psycho-analytical details perhaps she has preferred to give the novel a radically feminist turn, giving freedom and victory to Amrita, the exploited soul from the exploiter.

Shobha De *Sisters*, is the story of two sisters who are not only beautiful and wealthy but are also at war with each other. Mikki is the legitimate daughter of Seth Hiralal while Alisha is Seth Hiralal's daughter born through relationship with Leelabhen. Mikki and Alisha who are the worst enemies initially, but later turning out to be the best friends. Mikki initially agrees to marry Navin with the hope that he would support her to save her father's industries. The moment she realizes that he would be of no help to her she unhesitatingly breaks off her engagement with him. She marries Binny with the hope of entering into a lifelong bond and also with the hope of reviving her father's companies. Within a week after their marriage Mikki realizes that she has placed herself at Binny's mercy, she understands that she has been chasing a marriage of everlasting love. She discloses to her friend Amy: "he wants me to remain tight and firm for his pleasure." (p.119) Mikki realizes that to Binny, marriage is yet another step up the social ladder. She speaks out her heart agony to Amy:

"I wanted someone with whom I could share my life. Is that such an impossible expectation?"

Amy replies: "Not for us women, darling. But men are different. They are in search of something else. Sex for instance." (p. 116-117)

Here we find that it was Mikki who saves her father's industries at the cost of her individuality and her total personality in the hands of scheming husband.

Even when we go through *Snapshots*, is a story of six women who get together to share intimate experiences. All barriers dissolve when old and bold buddies get together. In the course of their heart to heart confessional talks, we see all sorts of kaleidoscopic patterns of liberation which are unfolded petals to petals, reveals sadness, happiness sequences occurring in the conversation. Sex, as desired and experienced by the New woman is duplicated by Ms. De.

"Though your husband was a rich man, with you he didn't feel confident. Your coldness kept him away. In his own way I thought that he loved you sincerely, But you didn't- Love him I mean. And he had to live with that and pretend that he didn't know." (p.171)

Here, in this novel we find that male supremacy is simply assumed; defying convention risks destruction. Susan Rubinow Gorsky points out that it is the thought that a

woman need a father to control her until her natural and legitimate master, her husband assumes the job. Trollope satirically compares women to ivy that delicate creeper and parasite that winds around the strong wall....such plants were not created to stretch out their branches alone. A woman must subordinate her opinions to her husband. But in Shobha De's novel we find more often it is the woman has learnt to switch off her husband's presence or undesired explorations but also switch on to her own identity for her own self.

To escape from the drudgery perpetrated by a cold, unfeeling and suspicious husband, Maya in *Second Thoughts* (1998) develops a liaison with her college going neighbour Nikhil in order to keep her 'self' her individuality intact and restore calmness to her yearning soul. Ms De here has tried to present the plight of the New Woman who is concerned in a maze of domestic chores and ignored presence, takes bold and unconventional steps to keep her identity and individuality intact.

Maya, a middle class Calcutta girl is married to Ranjan. She has keen desire to discover Bombay and pursue a career in textile designing. But her sense and sensibility are reduced to ashes by a fanciful moody, suspicious, calculating nature of her husband. Ranjan loathes anything that she loves. Maya wants a real husband not a clay model calculator obsessed with the balancing and budgeting act. Here it seems to be losing her identity every moment when she is with her husband. Almost as a gift of God comes Nikhil, a college going neighbour who is presented as a foil to Ranjan. Nikhil is appreciative, Ranjan, dictatorial, disparaging. Nikhil makes Maya feel that she belongs and Ranjan love making for her is always a letdown. To match such autocratic and depressing behaviour of a self willed and cold husband she dedicates herself to Nikhil. She has broken loose from pangs of conscience and feels she think of enjoying outings and longing for the romantic date with Nikhil.

"I lay awake all night dreaming of a large bird swooping down on me, claws out. Other than the odd mole hunt my body remained uncharted territory." (281)

So, the consummation of Maya's simmering love for Nikhil does not come unexpectedly. The incubation period is over, the New Woman steps out as bold, fearless, uncaring and looking ahead. It is a ray of hope for her: a new way to live, new promises of life to keep. Actually the second thoughts that arise in Maya's mind could very well be the first harbinger of the first thoughts that could come to the mind of the New Woman of the future who has to take decisions to assert her individuality and establish her identity.

Allied to the issue of marriage is the issue of sex in Shobha De's novels. In her novel we find all her women have pre- marital sex. Sex is no longer a taboo to her women. There is a great deal of sexual freedom in her women. Even marriage does not curtail sexual freedom, not only this we find the moment their marriages fail, her woman go out in search of more fulfilling relationships. Through her novels, De seeks to establish the fact that woman has the same feelings, passions, aspirations and values as a man and she is determined to fight it out for realizing her dreams. We can say that she has tried to portray that ambition is not the monopoly of the men only. Even women can be ambitious and they also reach that heights which they decide to assert themselves. The woman wants to take charge, to locate her identity, but she continues the search for her identity for herself and the real.

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