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Exploring the Psychological Hurdles Encountered by Urban Indian Women: A Study of Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* and *Strange Obsession*

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Abstract:

Urban women in India are considered to be those “privileged” females who live in metropolitan cities, have easy access to good education, developed infrastructures, advanced technologies and many facilities that rural population can only think of. Urban female population are believed to be more liberal and freer to choose a career they want, but this is true only for a very small percentage of females.

Most women in Urban areas are cooped up in household chores and the relatively small percentage of women (as compared to men) who are working are paid less than their male employees. In urban India, nearly half of the women do not leave their houses even once in a given day, The reasons for the same can be various- burden of household chores, taking care of their infants, dominating partner who won't let them work or socialise.

Shobhaa de is one such author among many, who talked and wrote about such issues. Shobhaa De was born in 1948, named Shobha Rajadhyaksha by her Brahmin parents in Maharashtra. She always dreamt of a perfect marriage since her early years but her first marriage ended in divorce and currently she lives with her second husband and two kids in Mumbai. She is the originator and editor of three magazines- ‘Stardust’, ‘Society’ and ‘Celebrity’.

This research elucidates the psychological challenges urban Indian women face, that Shobha de has given an intricate insight to in her books- "Second thoughts" and "Strange Obsession".

Keywords: Psychological, Urban, hurdles, liberal, sexuality, unwanted affection, burden, guilt, expectations, isolation.

Urban women in India are considered to be those "privileged" females who live in metropolitan cities, have easy access to good education, developed infrastructures, advanced technologies and many facilities that rural population can only think of. Urban female population are more liberal and freer to choose a career they want, but is that true for all the urban Indian women? Most women in Urban areas are cooped up in household chores and the relatively small percentage of women (as compared to men) who are working are paid less than their male employees. In urban India, nearly half of the women report that they did not leave their houses even once in a given day, according to an article titled "Gender gap in mobility outside home in urban India" that was published in Science Direct's journal *Travel Behaviour and Society*. The reasons for the same can be various- burden of household chores, taking care of their infants, dominating partner who won't let them work or socialise.

Shobhaa de is one such author among many, who talked and wrote about such issues. Shobhaa De was born in 1948, named Shobha Rajadhyaksha by her Brahmin parents in Maharashtra. She always dreamt of a perfect marriage since her early years but her first marriage ended in divorce and currently, she lives with her second husband and two kids in Mumbai. She is the originator and editor of three magazines- 'Stardust', 'Society' and 'Celebrity'.

Apart from Shobha De, many other women writers have also tackled women's issues, shedding light on their experiences in India. Arundhati Roy's powerful story reveals gender inequality and social barriers. Anita Desai delves into the complexity of women's identities and the challenges they face within traditional structures. Kamala Das fearlessly explores the themes of love, sexuality and women's liberation. Anita Nair's works offer fascinating insights into women's empowerment and social expectations. Mahasweta Devi challenges the social hierarchy and supports the struggle of marginalized women. Together, these authors amplify women's voices, generating important conversations about gender, sexuality, and social justice. Through their

literary contributions, they have played an important role in shaping the discourse on women's issues in India.

Through her books, "Strange Obsession," and "Second Thoughts", Shobhaa De tries to highlight the psychological challenges faced by Urban Indian women by focusing on the intricacies of their identities, societal expectations, and the effects of patriarchal norms which also affect their mental state.

Her novels emphasize on the urban issue of the modernistic society with its shadow of glitz and glamour, marriages, tangled relationships along with some other such issues which are also highlighted in this research through the books- 'Strange Obsession' and 'Second Thoughts'.

Women, in contemporary India are expected to comply to the rules and regulations set by their family, in-laws, and husband. Females are expected to be a "good mother", often considered "useless" Or less of a woman if unable to give birth-as highlighted in Simone De Beauvoir's "The Second Sex". Simone draws out a metaphorical comparison in her text between a woman and an animal and how women are oppressed and seen as someone whose sole purpose is to give birth.

Even today, all the issues that are brought to light in the mentioned books have relevance and we can relate with them. Women living in urban areas still need to deal with household tasks, take care of their children and cook for themselves and the family, even when they belong to a category of working women. It's considered their "duty" to make sure the house is functioning properly, only because they were born female and are supposed to live up to societal expectations resulting from being a woman.

This research seeks to elucidate the psychological hurdles that urban Indian women face, which Shobha de has given an intricate insight to, in her books- "Strange Obsession" and "Second thoughts".

City Dreams, Urban Nightmares: A Web of Complexities

Cities are considered the hubs of opportunities and prosperity. People go to cities with big dreams, hopes and ambitions. However, behind the glitz and glamour of big cities, there lies a web of complexities, waiting to trap us inside it.

One such city is Mumbai- 'the city of dreams', in both the selected novels, the protagonists (Maya in 'Second Thoughts' and Amrita in 'Strange Obsession') come to Mumbai with big dreams

and sparkle in their eyes, but soon their dreams are burnt to ashes and those ashes are blown away by the salty winds of Mumbai.

In the novel, *Second Thoughts*, Maya comes to Bombay from Calcutta with her mother, to meet her potential husband, Rajan, and this meeting was arranged by her mother's brother, Prodipda. When Maya arrived on the railway station, she noticed a different kind of smell- a smell of desperation and deceit, it was different from what Calcutta smelt like. She took a few steps forward and almost tripped over a dead body lying prone on the platform, it was the first ever dead body she had ever seen and it was a horrifying experience for her. Only after a few minutes of arriving in Bombay, Maya could already feel the darkness of this city. However, when Maya climbed into a taxi with her mother and uncle, and took a ride in South Bombay, this ride had a totally different effect on her. She felt that "Bombay was different-glittering, menacingly intimidating". She found herself falling in love with Bombay and she wanted to be bonded with Bombay forever, and the only way to do that was getting married to Ranjan.

Maya held a degree in textiles, and in her meeting with Ranjan and his mother- 'the Maliks', Maya's mother, Chitra dropped a hint about Maya wanting to pursue a career after marriage, Being a trained textile designer, she wanted to work with a big textile mill, as she was aware that there will be various opportunities for her in Bombay, but after the dismissing response from Ranjan, Maya was ready to even do something from the home itself, designing and selling sarees, just something in which she could utilize her skills. Although there was complete silence and no response after this discussion, she concluded that she'd be able to work after her marriage, but little did she know that it was never going to happen and even the 'to-be husband' that she found attracting now would be the most boring person in her all the more boring life. Her dreams were broken and shattered into bits when she faced the miserable, confined and troubled reality of her life which caused her great psychological distress and pain.

In *Strange Obsession*, the protagonist, Amrita Aggarwal, an extremely beautiful and privileged twenty-year-old girl from Delhi decides to go to Bombay to pursue a career in modelling. Her family loved her very much and supported her in achieving her dream. After a hard and emotional goodbye, Amrita left for Bombay.

Amrita was overwhelmed with Bombay streets and her numerous auditions. One day, she was getting out of a taxi in Colaba, with a lot of clothes in one hand and a makeup bag in another, wearing a very small skirt, rushing towards her audition when she fumbled and fell on the street.

Meenakshi or Minx was observing Amrita from aside while buying a pack of imported cigarettes from a Paan-wallah. Meenakshi's heart melted as she saw Amrita struggle with people around her shouting and passing comments on her, Minx decided to take control of the situation. She helped Amrita get up and scared off the crowd by announcing "I am Inspector General V.S. Iyengar's daughter". Minx told Amrita her name and asked her not to introduce herself as she already knows who she is (Amrita was a fairly good name in the modelling industry by now). Minx was infatuated with Amrita already and her series of helping Amrita had already begun. She told Amrita her uncle owns the agency where she has an appointment right now and that she will meet her there. She also waited three hours for her audition to get complete and was waiting for her in her black jeep outside to drop off Amrita. Amrita felt happy and relaxed as she felt the sea-breeze through her hair. Amrita found Minx staring at her strangely, in a way that no man ever did and even when Minx complimented her on her beauty, which she had been listening to all her life, it had a strange kind of effect on her, it felt different.

The very next day, Amrita's landlady told her that someone has sent flowers for her, it was a huge bouquet of flowers, so huge that she had never seen such a bouquet before, of course it was from Minx. The same day when she went for her photoshoot, an assistant asked if there is someone named Amrita in the room and told her that there is a call for her, Amrita was startled as no one knew that she was here. It was Minx who called just to enquire if Amrita had received the flowers or not. After the long shoot when she was walking, trying to find a cab, she saw Minx again, smoking cigarettes. Minx came to Amrita, took her bags and decided to drop her again. Amrita felt a great relief by Minx's efficient transport help but she wasn't aware of what taking so much help from a stranger could result in. All of this seemed okay to Amrita until she realized that Minx was turning out to be a strange creature, invading her privacy and doing just anything to grab Amrita's attention. Minx came to Amrita's p.g. and stole her undergarments, told her landlady they were needed for a shoot, placed a black rose on her dressing along with a sparkling diamond ring. The next morning, she cancelled her shoot with Karan, a great photographer with whom she once worked with earlier also. She slumped around her room until midday, and when she went to the kitchen, she saw a dead piglet in the sink! Blood was smeared all over it, Amrita was horrified and this was just the beginning of what she had gotten trapped into. It was psychologically tormenting for her to experience all this alone in a new city, she couldn't even tell her parents

about it as she knew they would worry a lot and ask her to return to Delhi. Her big dreams were starting to turn into her worst nightmare, she felt isolated in the midst of a bustling city.

As she becomes increasingly entangled in Minx's web, Amrita's expectations of a glamorous and carefree life in Mumbai begin to crumble. She is forced to confront the darker side of the city, filled with betrayal, manipulation, and danger.

Unwanted Affections: The Perils of a Dominating and Dangerous Lesbian Pursuit

Unwanted affections can manifest in various ways, and when coupled with dominance and danger, the consequences can be particularly distressing. In the context of a lesbian pursuit, a situation arises where one woman aggressively pursues another despite the clear lack of interest or reciprocation. This dominating and dangerous nature can stem from a sense of entitlement, where the pursuer believes that their desires should override the autonomy and consent of the other person. It can also be fueled by an unhealthy fixation or obsession, where the pursuer becomes possessive and controlling, disregarding the boundaries and well-being of the individual they are pursuing. Such behaviour not only disregards the emotional well-being of the person being pursued but can also pose a significant threat to their safety and overall sense of security. The dominating individual may believe they have the right to impose their affections, leading to a toxic power dynamic that leaves the other person feeling trapped and helpless. The recipient may experience fear, anxiety, and a loss of agency, unsure of how to handle the situation without risking further harm.

Minx's obsession was so dangerous not only for Amrita but for anyone who dared to come close to her. Minx saw Amrita like a thing which belonged to her. After the 'Rover incident' happened (Rover is the nickname given to Ranjit Grover, city's best known toyboy who kissed Amrita when she was out with her modelling friends and then they went to his flat together, this incident had spread like fire), Minx got him arrested and beaten up so badly that Amrita trembled when she saw him in the police station.

Minx threw Acid on Lola's face by deceiving her into believing that she was a producer and took her to a beach and threw acid on her face. Later on discovered, that she not only threw acid on her face she also put a blade into her vagina and minced her insides. Lola was half dead. This was done by Minx to take revenge from her as she stole a modelling campaign from Amrita and everyone was gossiping about it, Minx justified this behaviour by telling Amrita that she did this

for her. Minx even presented grotesque polaroids when Amrita denied believing this. Only a sadist would do this.

Minx also managed to hire someone to crash Prabha's car when he was going to his farmhouse on the outskirts of Delhi. Minx was jealous that Amrita met him and was attracted to him and that she asked him for help which Amrita thought he could provide as he was a successful journalist.

Minx was ready to kill anyone to prove her love to Amrita. She was even ready to kill herself for that matter.

Minx was so hellbent on making Amrita hers that she often did psychotic things like once she barged into Amrita's p.g. and went through her belongings, she went to the extent of stealing her lingerie. She did scary things like keeping a bleeding piglet in the sink and an animal's heart in the fridge to scare Amrita.

Minx tried to look out for Amrita in any way she could like getting her a AC, paying her electricity bills, providing her with modelling contracts and getting her expensive jewellery. Minx even called Amrita's mother in Delhi and asked her about the recipes of her favourite food and she would prepare them for her, but she was imposing all this as Amrita didn't really felt good about these things she just wanted to be left alone yet Minx never thought about that, she just kept imposing herself on Amrita like she owns her, which led to Amrita feeling trapped, helpless and mentally tormented.

Existential feminism offers a pertinent lens through which to examine the novel "Strange Obsession," delving into the dynamics of a straight woman ensnared in an unwanted relationship by an obsessive and controlling lesbian woman. The work of feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir is considered the beginning of existential feminism. Her 1949 book *The Second Sex* is considered the founding work for existential feminism. The theory emphasizes the individual's freedom of choice, self-awareness, and existential responsibility, thus shedding light on how the straight woman's autonomy and agency are compromised in the face of the dominant lesbian's overpowering pursuit.

Existential feminism emphasizes the individual's freedom, agency, and self-determination in navigating their existence, particularly in the face of societal constraints and expectations. In "Strange Obsession," the application of existential feminist theory can shed light on the protagonist's struggle to assert her autonomy and confront the oppressive dynamics of the relationship she finds herself trapped in.

Unveiling The Hidden Pain: The immense loneliness faced by women trapped in unfulfilling marriages

An unfulfilling marriage is one in which the couple fails to provide each other the love, affection, companionship, intimacy and emotional support they need to stay together happily. Women often face domination by the hands of their husbands and are expected to comply with the rules and regulations created by their life partners. It should be noted that these rules are meant to be strictly followed only by the female and not the male, he can do what he wishes to, his freedom is never sacrificed.

In “Second Thoughts”, Maya suffered from immense loneliness due to her unfulfilling marriage with Ranjan. She was very excited to get married and move into a big city and like every girl, hoped that her husband would be loving, caring and emotionally supportive towards her.

After the marriage, all her excitement went down the drain when she experienced the reality of their boring and unloving marriage. The question of intimacy was out of the box, as Ranjan was never into it. While Maya craved physical closeness, her husband was the opposite.

They didn't talk properly, didn't go out on dates to spent time together and never had sexual relations which also posed a question about Rajan's probable impotency and hence, she knew they were never going to have a baby.

A happy, stable, and functional marriage depends heavily on intimacy. Positive growth and development, as well as mutual support and fulfilment, can be fostered through intimacy. Intimacy can also improve heart health, boost stress tolerance, and lessen the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Whether physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, or social intimacy all are possible. The most important connection needed in a romantic relationship is emotional intimacy. It involves sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences with your significant other. Emotional proximity can provide a greater capacity for mutual understanding and acceptance. This can include vulnerability, empathy, and nonjudgmental listening.

Lack of intimacy can give way to constant fights, disagreements, sadness, insecurity and feeling of loneliness, which were all experienced by Maya as her husband never paid attention to her and avoided involving in any form of intimacy. To him, his role as a husband was just to earn money to make the house run properly and take care of his sick mother even if it requires ignoring his wife's comfort and needs.

Maya was completely isolated. Even though she had a degree in textile designs and she thought she was good at it, she was never encouraged by her husband to take up a job related to that. All she was expected to do was stay at home and look after the house. Despite there was house-help for cleaning the house, washing clothes and doing the dishes and Maya had A LOT of time to do something productive, she was never “allowed” to do anything as such.

She was not even allowed to talk to the neighbours, borrow or lend something to them or make any friends. She could even make a phone call at her mother’s house only when it was something important. Ranjan always saw himself as the superior, the important one and her wife as the inferior and unimportant. As Simone De Beauvoir wrote in her Feministic work, men are seen as the subject, the superior and the females as the “other” and inferior.

Maya was all alone in a new city, with no one to talk to, no friend to confide in. She felt so bored all day that she started enjoying stupid mechanical activities like ironing the bed cover and even the dusters, cleaning the same thing twice or thrice a day. She was constantly criticized by her husband for almost everything she did. She never received love from him and they never did normal things which couple do- like go on dates, going out for strolls or movies. The only outing that they had were Ranjan’s office parties which bored Maya to death.

Her husband used to talk to his mother more than his wife, Maya was never included in anything, just kept at home to take care of the chores that were already completed. One can only imagine what this kind of isolation could do to a person’s mental state.

The kind of ignorance she received from her husband along with the lack of communication, emotional connect and physical touch compelled her to break her husband’s rules of not talking to the neighbours or going out of the house, she went out and talked to other people behind his back to feel a little alive and sane.

There was a college going neighbour which was almost Maya’s age and they started a friendship behind Ranjan’s back. Nikhil was everything that Ranjan was not, and he made Maya happy in a way that her husband was never able to. But if we look closely, Nikhil just took advantage of Maya’s loneliness and had a physical encounter with her, which meant a lot to Maya but not to Nikhil, as shortly after all this, the news of his engagement was announced by his mother- which is where the novel ends too.

Haunted by Desire: Wrestling with Guilt

In both the novels, the female protagonists are seen experiencing guilt and psychological distress caused by their hidden desires or inner thoughts.

Maya, in *Second Thoughts*, is seen struggling with her desire and guilt that it caused her. She finds herself in a complex and morally challenging situation. Feeling neglected and starved for intimacy in her marriage, she seeks solace and fulfilment in a friendship bond with her neighbour, a college-going boy named Nikhil, which later on turns into an affair.

Even though Maya enjoys the newly found emotional and physical connection with Nikhil, she also experiences an intense feeling of guilt.

While in one moment she feels happy to be around Nikhil, the other moment she feels distressed. Nikhil makes her feel special, takes her out on dates and also, once he made a mix tape for her to listen, but she feels scared and guilty when she fears that Ranjan might find out the hidden mix tape which she hid in the kitchen drawer. Whenever her husband, Ranjan asks her about anything that could be related to Nikhil, Maya trembles with fear as she feels scared that her truth may come out. Her mind is constantly under fear and she feels psychologically exhausted trying to make excuses and hide her affair from her husband.

This guilt stems from the societal norms and expectations regarding fidelity in marriage, as well as from her own internal moral compass.

Her guilt can be observed through the cognitive dissonance theory, by Leon Festinger. According to this theory, individuals experience discomfort when their actions conflict with their beliefs or values. In Maya's case, she knows that cheating on her husband is wrong, yet she continues to engage in her affair with Nikhil. This internal conflict leads to her feelings of guilt and shame that bothers her to the extent that she feels troubled even about little things that wouldn't normally affect her.

Another psychological theory which can explain Maya's affair with Nikhil is, Attachment Theory by John Bowlby. According to this theory, "humans are born with a need to form a close emotional bond with a caregiver". Nikhil provides Maya with the care and affection which her husband fails to provide her, which makes her turn to Nikhil to fulfil this void inside her.

Maya's guilt may also be influenced by the societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding marriage and fidelity. As a dutiful and respected woman, she should not even think about indulging in an affair.

Additionally, Maya's guilt may be compounded by the fear of getting caught and facing the consequences of her actions. The fear of losing her husband, damaging her reputation, and hurting her family contributed to her internal turmoil.

In *Strange Obsession*, after a long time when Amrita finally managed to escape Meenakshi's web, with the help of a NRI guy, Rakesh Bhatia who was introduced to Amrita as an arranged marriage prospect, Amrita was constantly burdened by the thought that maybe she wasn't being fair to Rakesh and that she only used him as a way for her to escape Minx's trap. Amrita struggled with complex thoughts that were a result of her past with Minx. Minx spoiled her with the most expensive things, was ready to kill and die for her, and even though she forced herself upon Amrita despite her resistance, Amrita liked the sensations that Minx aroused in her. Amrita enjoyed their act of intimacy (only the first few contacts initially), yet she felt guilty about it and kept telling herself "It was a mistake".

Minx had affected Amrita's mind very strongly, so much so that she worried if she and Rakesh would be physically compatible? "Had minx spoiled her for everyone else-particularly men? Would she feel the same way again with another person- a less adoring, less worshipful, less awestruck partner?".

Her past had deeply affected her psyche. While Amrita may have experienced moments of pleasure or attraction towards Minx, the overall context of their relationship was one of manipulation, torture and control and despite her sometimes enjoying the sexual encounters with Minx, they were ultimately forced upon her, leaving her feeling violated and powerless. This experience likely left Amrita with deep-seated emotional wounds and a sense of guilt or shame about her own desires and sexuality. This has likely created a sense of emotional turmoil and confusion within Amrita, making it difficult for her to fully engage in a healthy and fulfilling sexual relationship with Rakesh.

Her relationship with Minx also might have contributed to her confusion and ambivalence towards sex. The fact that she found some pleasure in her encounters with Minx despite the circumstances, may have left her questioning her own desires and struggling to reconcile her conflicting emotions. This can explain the reason why Amrita was relieved and felt grateful when Rakesh told her that he wanted to wait until marriage for sex .

Amrita couldn't get Minx out of her head even when she and Rakesh were having their first moment of intimacy together- "Amrita shut her eyes and tried to blank her mind of Minx and the pattern their love-making had fallen into".

The past trauma that she had experienced affected her deeply and hindered in her way of pursuing a "normal marriage". "In a few private moments she had asked herself whether she needed to consult a therapist but quickly dismissed the thought".

The weight of her past experiences bore heavily upon her psyche, leaving her feeling guilty, ashamed, psychologically tormented and disturbed.

Conclusion

Shobhaa De, wrote the chosen novels keeping in mind the troubles that females face in their day-to-day lives and presented them in her novels very clearly, directly and descriptively through the female characters.

Even though our society has developed so much, the issues portrayed in the selected texts still remain relevant to us. As depicted through the struggles faced by Amrita in *Strange Obsession* and Maya in *Second Thoughts*, we gain a clear insight about how women in urban India are encountered by psychological hurdles which are too complex to be untangled easily.

The selected texts highlight the battles fought by females with their own minds and the male dominated society. Many of these issues are still faced by women today, as they are expected to fulfil certain duties and expectations that are attached to the female gender. Females need to assert their position in the society, ditch the male-dominant societal rules and should be aware when to seek professional help from counselors or therapists to get help in overcoming specific challenges.

We, as a society, should also play a role in creating a supportive, judgement-free and safe environment around women which can lead to their overall wellbeing.

In conclusion, the psychological hardships that urban Indian women undergo as portrayed in Shobhaa De's books have been thoroughly explored in this research, which has also unraveled the complex web of sociocultural influences and personal battles that form these women's experiences.

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