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SHOBHA DE AS A POST-MODERN INDIAN WOMAN NOVELIST

Women writers constitute a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. They have their own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonist. A number of Indian women writers on the literary scene like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapur, Jhumpa Lahiri, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai who contributed significantly to Indian writing in English.

Commenting on the post- modern Indian women's writing, Hitaishi Singh writes:

The modern women writers started writing with the self- imposed task of representing themselves in a style away from the stereotyping of fiction by Raja Rao or R. K. Narayan and others, or for that matter expressing themselves and their inner self and feelings with the dummy characters like Radha-Krishna, Savitri-Satyavan, veiled Muslim women, etc. 1

All Indian women writers have produced significant novels, making a mark in the literary world. However, on reading Shobha De's novels, one can get some idea about the changing trends in Indian writing in English. Shobha De is one of the most popular Indian women writers writing in English. She is described as a very realistic writer. She was born in Maharashtra in 1948 and was educated in Delhi and Bombay. She graduated from St. Xavier's College, Bombay with a degree in psychology. Shobha De recalls the past and says:

This was downtown Mumbai- fashionable, affluent and sexy..... I had found my kind of environment, my kind of people, my kind of fun. 2

She began a Career in journalism in 1970, and edited three popular magazines Stardust, Society and Celebrity. She was also consulting Editor to Sunday and Mega city. At present she is working as a free lance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines. She is mother of six and lives in Bombay with her family. Now a days, at the age of sixty five she is as charming as ever.

Till today, Shobha De has produced nineteen books to her credit. Her writing includes novels, stories, letters, essays and an autobiography but, she is more known as a modern Indian woman novelist than anything else. Her fictional output consists of seven novels, *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Snapshots* (1995), and *Second Thoughts* (1996). Besides these novels there are books of non-fiction *Uncertain Liaisons: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban Life* (1993), *Shooting From The hips: Selected Writing* (1994), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Surviving Men* (1997), *Selective Memory-Stories from My Life (Autobiography)* (1998), *Speed Post* (1999), *Spouse-The truth about Marriage* (2005), *Sandhya's Secret* (2009), *Superstar India-From Incredible to Unstoppable* (2008), *Shobha At Sixty* (2010), *Sethji* (2012) and *Shobha: Never a Dull De* (2013). Most of the titles of her works begin with syllable 'S' being the first syllable of her name. Her fictional oeuvre has now been introduced in the curriculum of the University of London, Australia and in the University of Bombay.

Most of her books are best sellers as she realistically projects the image of the upper-class woman of contemporary India. She believes that the main purpose of art is to present the realistic approach of life. She has great understanding of the depth of the psyche of woman and her problems. Her images and metaphors may appear to be lewd, licentious and crossing the limits of decency. However, she has described truthfully not only in the matter of theme but also the linguistic expression and man-woman intimate interaction the life as she witnessed. Some critics categorize Shobha De as pornographic novelist but here is the reality. Dr. Yamuna Prasad rightly says:

Shobha De is a realist. There are some nude and sexy painting-passages verging to soft pornography being all necked and nothing Lawrencean. But they are fleshes of a momentary passion of sex starved men and women usually seen in the corrupt business world where women are taken as sex-idols and playthings. Hence, exhibitions of sex are a part of reality.³

Shobha De's novels clearly expose her attempts to ruin the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society. In this male dominated society, women from their childhood are made to learn how to compromise and adjust with secondary status. Adolescent stage makes them think that their desires will be fulfilled in their marriages for they look at marriage as a solution to their problems. But in reality, marriage ruins all their dreams and they suffer miserably in their marital lives. And this confusing situation compels them sometimes to take such step, which is a major divergence from the established traditional norms. Within the framework of her novels, Shobha De portrays the breaking up of the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisions complete sexual freedom with no concept of loyalty. She firmly believes that a woman has been gifted just one life which she must live to the lees. Her view about marriage is very balanced in the sense that she writes of men who fail to understand the psyche of women, more so her emotional needs resulting in marital rift.

Shobha De differs extensively from other Indian women novelists in English because she believes in a very frank describing of incidents and openheartedness. She uses a new idiom by acclimatizing the contemporary society to the English language, adds to the charm of the novel. Nothing is reserved in her fiction. As a result, the conventional people in India criticize her for her open discussion of sexual matters. But she is the last person to care for what the conventional readers say about the subject-matter of her fiction. In fact, all classes of people not only in India but all over the world read and enjoy her fiction. It is no less achievement. As Shivika Verma observes:

Shobha has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. She feels that most of the problems of women are sex-oriented and sex-centered in the male dominated society. Her women characters are free from the chains and husband and society, reactionary and rebel, and "new woman" and "a liberated human being".⁴

She portrays a variety of women from the traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated women. This variety of women portrayed in her novels brings out different ways in which these women are subjected to male hegemony. An interesting characteristic of Shobha De's portrayal of these women is the presence of subgroups of women, within the main group, that may be highly liberated, oppressive and dominating. They include the modern and the traditional Indian middle-class women. De has very cleverly projected the glamorous images of the attractive, independent and highly professional women trying to dominate the power structure. But the external glory of life these women seem to enjoy is marked by frustration and disgust. It is an outcome of their deviant behaviour. The traditional Indian women, inspite of feeling hopeless and suffocated, try to adjust themselves in the social system prescribed by the male dominated race, milieu and momentum. As a result, Shobha De realistically depicts the images of different types of women in her fiction. She once stated that she preferred not to be branded as a feminist. She says:

I write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without raising a feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation.⁵

Shobha De is a glamorous personality who is a keen observer of upper-class life of cosmopolitan cities, particularly Mumbai. The story of her life is the story of the 'New Woman' of the post-independence India. She presents the vital reality and makes us aware of the miseries of women and injustices done to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society. As a result, the women in her novels appear as life like human beings. Her extraordinary language style, her newness of words and her realistic portrayal of troubles of women are worth noticing.

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