



## **HYBRID IDENTITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Indian Writing in English has undoubtedly acquired its own independent identity, it no more remains mere imitative or derivative, its long journey from colonial to post-colonial, from imperial to democratic and from English to Hinglish forms a remarkable chapter in the history of world literature. Indian English fiction in the new millennium has brought about many avenues before the human race, it has opened a new vista of cultural confluence. Shobha De daringly mirrors the reality of the contemporary society where career oriented women struggle with the dual responsibilities both at home and at the working places. The powerlessness, economic dependency, marginalization of women in the institution of marriage and family, necessitate women to search for the equal status and equal power in patriarchal society. When they get economical independency and equal status, they become confident and desire autonomous existence, adopting new strategies such as abortions, illegal sexual relationships, remaining aloof from the household responsibilities. The journey of woman from the traditional servile creature to the emergence of New Woman with a quest for 'identity' becomes the main crux of Shobha De's novels as it has become the way of life of present day urban aristocratic ladies.

**Keywords :** [urbanized women, emancipation of the 'Second Sex', cosmopolitan synthesis, contemporary culture, cultural confluence, patriarchal society]

Women's body and its function determine women's social position which is considered to be inferior than that of men. Simon de Beauvoir reviews the physiological structure, development and functions of the female and concludes that the 'female to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species' (60). She argues that there is no physical or psychological reason why woman should be inferior to men, yet the reproductive function that has placed them in lower level tying them to the domestic sphere and associating themselves with body.

The myths and the epics subordinate the subservient position of women. The well known Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone portrays the story of the beautiful girl Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, the Goddess of Nature and her abduction by Hades, the brother of Zeus, the God of the Underworld. In patriarchal ideology, the lure and capture of Persephone depicts the fate of women under the domination of self-centered Hades, a symbol of anthropocentrism. *The Mahabharatha* is not only dynastic struggle for throne of Hastinapura between the Pandavas and the Kauras, it is the exploitation of women - Ambika and Ambalika forced to give the future heir of Hastinapur, Gandhari,

blindfolded her eyes for the husband, Draupadi, the wife of five husbands used as a pawn in the court. Another best example is the dual oppression of woman in the *Bible*, how Adam and Eve committed the sin of disobedience and the curse that woman should bear children in pain and ruled by her husband thereby becoming the subordinates or slaves to men.

Women, in general, are subject to various forms of oppression partly because she is a woman and partly because of her race, class, religion and sexual exploitation. Women writers of all centuries, despite their image as ardent advocates of feminism, the images of women as inferior beings by evolving a notion of new womanhood which involves the growth of wholly battered and abused by society to one who consciously tries to project her individuality culturally and politically. Feminism, as is well known, has its three waves, the first wave (1848s) dealt mainly with the suffrage movement, the second wave (1960s) motivated women to understand aspect of their personal lives as deeply politicized and reflective of the sexist structure of power, the third wave (1990s) ignited the live feminist issues to achieve liberty, equality and dignity by portraying the revolutionary female character or sharing the writers'

autobiographical experiences. Through the decades, the writers try to give a voice to the long-silenced women by asserting their identities and authenticity in a world which determines their status by their womanhood.

Oppression is an essentially masculine activity which springs from the male's aggressive need to dominate. In the male's world, men and society expects all the women to conform themselves to their structures. Women's free and independent existence becomes intolerable to men. They resist women's demands for equality. An institution like marriage traps them and confines the women's role strictly to wifehood and motherhood. This socialization like a sexist culture treats women as inert and inferior and afflicts them with a natural defectiveness. Women's marginalization and treatment as 'other' objectify them in the eyes of males and make them believe that men ought to be superior to women. Men become the colonizers and women the colonized.

In the latest celebrity memoir *Becoming* (2018) penned by Michelle Obama, the first successful lady of the USA, discrimination and diversity in politics is acute in an ocean of whiteness and maleness. She documents how she grew up

in modest circumstances, her father was a blue-collar worker in a water filtration plant and her mother – the story of Michelle Robinson, a young and determined black woman, her journey from the small apartment in Euclid Avenue to the massive White House in Pennsylvania, the First Lady in the House of Representatives. She vividly sees a different truth in the crowd where more than half the people opposed her husband, "They would fight everything Barack did, I realized whether it was good for the country or not" (184). It is highly disappointing that post-Obama America has become more White and more male. Hence racial discrimination and gender domination are nothing new, it is inherent in all social structures, whatever progress may be in technology.

Indian Writing in English has undoubtedly acquired its own independent identity, it no more remains mere imitative or derivative, its long journey from colonial to post-colonial, from imperial to democratic and from English to Hinglish forms a remarkable chapter in the history of world literature. Indian English fiction in the new millennium has brought about many avenues before the human race, it has opened a new vista of cultural confluence.

The writers explore and expose the exploitation and subjugation in the depressive marginalized social structure. They feel the need to transform systems of exploitation whether based on gender, race or class into a collective solidarity for liberation through the ways of protest and resistance. Since the quarter of the twentieth century till the present two decades of the millennium, the Indian Women novelists started articulating women's aspirations, their professional endeavours, their newly formed relationship with man and the perceptions of motherhood. Many writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Shagal, Shashi Deshpande, Uma Vasudev, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Gita Mehta, etc. have presented various forms of women resistance to patriarchal norms. Women are no longer presented as meek, passive but energetic with a sense of self-consciousness and self-assertiveness. Writers like Shobha De, construct their narration by going a step forward by allowing their protagonists to step out of the patriarchal control. Shobha De has deliberately tried to emphasize that if women try to step out of the boundaries defined by men, they are silenced are sidelined.

Shobha De wrote about the elite urbanized women, her novels portray the glamour world of the upper middle class, her strength lies in the realistic projection of the glamour world which makes it possible to unmask and expose the vicious structure of power and money that are at work in the upper echelons of the Indian society. She feels that tortures and traumas of an urbanized elite woman are basically the same as that of a woman from a rural background. She tries to explain that the band of feminism is not about women getting up and fighting for her rights but it's more sly and submissive because the issues they raise are extremely relevant as they expose the subtle ways in which the patriarchal system works to perpetual man's domination in society and interpersonal relationships.

Being a professional journalist, Shobha De is concerned with the emancipation of the 'Second Sex' and woman, victimized and marginalized by the established conventional traditions of Indian society, becomes the central consciousness of all her novels. Her novels give a clear picture of a woman caught between patriarchy and imperialism. This is the displace figuration of every modern woman who is being sandwiched between tradition

and modernization because she does not describe her women characters as love-slaves or mere helpmates at home. In all her novels, Shobha De presumably mirrors her own feminist and sexist mindset.

Narendra Kumar Neb in her article “Shobha De: To Read or Not to Read” says:

De’s treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behaviour as a means of women’s emancipation. But the reality is different and De’s concerns are rather otherwise. Her prime concern is to expose the futility and meaningless of such kind of pseudo-feminist behaviour (Neb 163).

De’s writing about sexuality is still hurtful to men as it could mean women talking about their husband’s shortcomings or writing about being bored with them sexually, mentally or spiritually. She simply attempts to shatter patriarchal harmony and raise her voice of protest against male dominance. At a recent seminar, Shobha De puts it succinctly, “the label of a feminist

writer is one that marginalizes I, for one, identify myself as a woman writer because of being read, judged and perceived differently by male readers on account of my gender”

Remaining only as an ‘other’ in the masculine society, deep-rooted in male culture, women tend to lose their ‘individuality’, they are silenced and their confidence in their own capacity is completely diminished. Serving and fulfilling men’s needs and wishes become the everlasting job of women. Beauvoir strongly argues that “the fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty” (322). Though feminists try to erase the secondary status of women and fight for their equal rights, the harmonious relationship between men and women can be achieved through the acknowledgement of biological differences. So it is pertinent to all women to acclaim that they are distinct not inferior to men. Sherry Ortner in *Is Male to Female* points out “women are biologically, psychologically and socially different from men” (154). Shashi Deshpande in her book *Writing from Margin and Other Essays* claims that

It is an understanding that I am different, not inferior. And how can feminism be anti-men, when it is really working for a better, a more meaningful and companionable relationship between women and men, instead of the uneasy relationship between the tyrant and the oppressed. (83-84)

Feminist-conscious rising is the key concept in the works of women writers all over the world because through the female characters, they encourage every women to discover their distinct identity. It is misleading to them heroines. They are female heroes. Shobha De has written more than seventeen books so far out of which seven are novels. Her *Snapshots* (1996) brings out a very realistic picture of the urban women and their unorthodox life style. Infidelity, incest, rape, lust, lies and even death lurk behind the apparently placid lives of these six women – Reema, Swati, Aparna, Noor, Surekha and Rashmi and their experience representing different kinds of urban women in India, form the substance of the novel appropriately called *Snapshots*.

Shobha De depicts the breaking up of the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In such a situation, men and women become partners in love and life is presented as it is, not as it should be. Shobha De's *Snapshots* is about the experience of six upper class women, six schoolmates - Reema, Swati, Aparna, Noor, Surekha and Rashmi. The word 'Snapshot' represents a snatched moment in time, a frozen memento, a source of reminiscence but it is not associated with the sophistication and artistry of a photograph. The novel gets its title from the snapshots of a shared past that six women of the story are to bring to their reunion and the glamorous singer – actress Swati meticulously has planned things out, made arrangements for all women to assemble at Reema's house on the occasion of Swati's return from the states.

The novel reads like a film that depends largely on montage – itself resembling a series of snapshots significantly juxtaposed against one another. The snapshots link the characters together as they link their present; static souvenirs themselves, they set off a trail of memories that had lain hidden beneath the surface of everyday existence.

The social status of women has been changing with each decade leaving scope for their freedom and individuality, thereby exerting a great influence on marital relations and morality of modern women in the society. Aparna in *Snapshots* is a divorcee, undeterred, she reaches the top rung of the corporate ladder, and nothing can undermine her confidence and wholeness. In her social and professional sphere, her conduct is anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial. To her, the word husband is an awful word and she rejects marriage. She does not like to be treated and humiliated like a maid servant by her dominating and selfish husband, Rohit. She struggles for equal powers and rights. Shobha De uses her pen caustically in order to advocate women's place by defining strange human relationships, where sex acts like a catalyst to reach the competent heights of her personal career. She makes her women heroes realize that female empowerment is a product of financial independence and freedom. Aparna divorces her husband, Rohit and remains undisturbed without the support of a man as "a corporate woman, an Indian corporate woman, a business woman" (180).

In colonial literature, women's desire for economic self-sufficiency is either

ostracized socially or ignored completely. But Shobha De's women are very often career minded personalities with financial independence and female empowerment. Swati's friends, in response to her invitation, assemble at a lunch in Reema's home with their snapshots, albums, old and new photographs.

De's women have diverse marital status. Rashmi is an unwed mother saddled with the responsibility of a son. Swati and Aparna are divorcees. Swati lives the life of a liberated woman, leading a life of her own with her former husband in London. Noor is still a maid and doomed to die unmarried at the end of the novel. Reema and Surekha expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of modern women, looking for rich people as their husbands.

Reema marries Ravi, the son of a prosperous business man. However, her married life with Ravi is not happy. She finds that her husband is not interested in satisfying her sexually. Hence she turns to Ranadheer, her husband's brother to gratify her sexual desires. Though it is immoral for a woman to have sex with her brother-in-law, it is not unnatural to the cosmopolitan women in India. Swati comments on it:

There is nothing unnatural about it. Come on, you can tell us. I believe it's the done thing in Delhi society to sleep with your husband's brother. Wow, Reema, may be you'll start a similar trend in Bombay. (104)

It exposes the shallowness of morality in aristocratic families of urban world.

In de's fictional world, successful working women are no utopian dreamers. The married life of Surekha is not happy. Surekha marries a prosperous man, Harsha at the age of nineteen. Sex with her husband is meaningless for her:

What is there? It doesn't cost me anything. I open my legs mechanically and stare at the clock on the wall across the bed. It is all over in about six or eight minutes. (158)

De evinces a daredevil courage in writing freely about sex, the new woman and society. While going through *Snapshots*, One would wonder if provoking detestation of sexual promiscuity and lesbianism is the purpose celebrating it. Resistance and

rebellion against the old norms and values is the trend of De's characters.

*Snapshots* unveils the life of girls of Santa Maria High School, educated, self-contained and independent. According to feminists, women can be equal to men in all matters but the biological differences between men and women, especially reproduction makes women psychologically stronger but physically less strong. De's women take life as challenge, taking tougher decisions like declining motherhood for the sake of their career. Aparna declines motherhood in order to gain equal power with men. She holds the opinion that the nature of children leads to dependency on man. "No babies, we can't afford them" (20). This attitude results in the divorce with her husband. She remains undisturbed after the divorce, living an independent life without any support of a man.

Shobha De daringly mirrors the reality of the contemporary society where career oriented women struggle with the dual responsibilities both at home and at the working places. The powerlessness, economic dependency, marginalization of women in the institution of marriage and family, necessitate women to search for the equal status and equal power in patriarchal



society. When they get economical independency and equal status, they become confident and desire autonomous existence, adopting new strategies such as abortions, illegal sexual relationships, remaining aloof from the household responsibilities. The journey of woman from the traditional servile creature to the emergence of New Woman with a quest for 'identity' becomes the main crux of Shobha De's novels as it has become the way of life of present day urban aristocratic ladies.

The rapid development in the area of science and information technology which is drastically narrowing the geographical, physical, rational, cultural and lingual distances through frequent conversations and contacts inevitably develops a cosmopolitan culture. Most Indian women writers in English are brought up in the background of upper-class urban life and quite not closely acquainted with Indian life and society at the gross root level. The most aspiring writers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, endowed with lavish gifts, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and Kiran Desai are concerned with globalization and multiculturalism and portray the progress of colonial neurosis, the completely changed cosmopolitan society in their novels. Shobha De, the dynamic model who moved as a

magazine editor, columnist, social commentator, TV scriptwriter and author, 'keenly observed and astutely chronicled the new India-brash, affluent High society hi-jinks, movie-star follies, celebrity neurosis' (*Indian Women Novelists in English* 103).

The Indian fiction, which pictured the evils of child marriage and dowry system in the Pre-Independence period, witnesses the emergence of a new woman and a new female consciousness in the present decade. It has given up the old patriarchal system and submissive heroines as passive sufferers. In the feminist writings, marriage has been incomplete neither emotional nor spiritual. Since there is no intimacy and familiarity, arranged marriage becomes an organized rape. In *British and Indian Feminism*, Miti Pandey points out the liberated women from the institution of marriage: "Marriage is a difficult enough business for two people to merge into one identity." (94)

Though Shobha De focuses de focuses her attention on the 'richie-rich' intriguing corporate world of business tycoons all relationships centering around sex and sexual encounters, she considers marriage is important for her in her practical life. Just after ninety minutes of her divorce

from her husband Sudhir in July 1984, Shobha De married Dilip because she thinks:

Marriage to me connotes commitment and surrender merging with blending, overlapping, combining. It is a symbolic relationship where one feeds on the other, depends on the other, needs the other. There is no room or requirement 'space'. It is a misleading and mischievous concept that has let woman to several modern-day marriages breaking up- perhaps because the two people have misconstrued its true interpretation. (481)

There is a prevalent opinion that marriage is not regarded as essential in the fictional world of Shobha De. But quite contrary, she gives paramount importance to marriage in woman's life. She dives deep into the hearts of liberated upper class women in the contemporary society and her feminist view about the institution of marriage as the husband-wife relationship, of the perfect understanding that two people shared within this sacred relationship.

Bijay Kumar Das in his *Critical Essays in Post-colonial Literature* remarks

Shobha De seems to say that sex is a part of life and in order to accept life one has to affirm sensuality. She depicts the lives of young men and women. Particularly rich upper class people who no longer consider faithfulness and constancy in love a virtue, the description of union between the lovers or wife and husband becomes too open and vulgar to be enjoyable. (99)

The seventh novel of Shobha De *The Second Thoughts* focuses on the hollowness of Indian marriage, the fall of another Eve, Maya trapped in matrimony. Maya, the protagonist is eager to escape her dull middle-class home in Kolkatta moving into the suburban Mumbai by marrying Ranjan. The conservatism and patriarchal view of Ranjan sabotages the spirit of a trained textile designer and attractive young lady. "I am earning well enough to support a wife and family" (*The Second Thoughts* 11). Further, Ranjan, a twenty-eight year old virgin, brilliant and foreign-educated, looks

at his wife in ‘an almost brotherly gesture’, ‘a little repulsed’ (50) by Maya’s nearness. Maya who has happy conviction about marriage and her dreams about a foreign-educated, Mumbai based bridegroom is depressed by the clumsy sex honeymoon. The presence of ravishing and captivating wife as Maya couldn’t excite any sexual feelings in Ranjan and to hide his impotency, he develops a communication gap by asking his wife to stay away from women of Mumbai because they have ‘no morals, lazy, spoilt and spend all time shopping or eating unconcerned about their domestic life’ (55). Ranjan is never ready to perform his role as a husband to satisfy the physical desires of his wife.

Marriage cripples Maya’s life and she is reduced from a free and fluttering being to a full time domestic servant without pay even worse than a resident cook simply for the role of a ‘good wife who has to learn to adjust and sacrifice’ (124). Maya’s suffering, subjugation, isolation and deprived condition has created emptiness in her married life and Mumbai’s monotonous life. At this critical time, she strikes up a friendship with Nikhil, her charming college-going neighbor who is ‘good looking, confident, sporty, cocky, flirtatious, lazy, spoilt and quite irresistible’ (32). She

enjoys her sexual relationship with Nikhil because it eases her loneliness and mental tension but she remains loyal to her husband. When she comes to know of Nikhil’s engagement with Anshu, a Delhi based girl, she says to her husband Ranjan.

“The more I started at the spilled soup, the funnier I found it. I knew I would have to make it again from scratch” (289). Fidelity, understanding and adjustment alone make a marriage successful and lasting. ‘Modernity is not the solution. Though the novel is a slice of urban life, Shobha De advocates the need of a rational approach by stressing the traditional faith: The house in which spouses are mutually satisfied and keep each other happy, thrives and prospers. The grand edifice of happy married life is based upon genuine love deep respect and sense of gratitude. Maya is trapped into a meaningless marriage. It is the picture of marginalization of the Indian women, the portrayal of the family and marriage in the wealthy classes of urban Indian society’.

Husband’s tyrannical attitude at home is a form of displaying colonial power. They seize upon the home and the women as emblems of colonized and his victory as the colonizer. As Simone de Beauvoir says,

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity: they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not succeed in living completely to life of human being. Reared by women within a feministic world their normal destiny is marriage which still mean subordination to man: for masculine prestige is far from extinction resting still upon solid, economic and social foundation (*The Second Sex XXXV*).

Indian women have transformed themselves belonging to the modern world. But the unwillingness of Indian male, who seems to be still in top, has created imbalance in the society and this has cast a major blow to the institution of marriage.

In De's fictional works, the female protagonists feel liberated by the constricting experience with their cocooned culture and their swathe with vivid autonomy in their lifestyles. They adopt a cultural mixture, fluid and hybrid in texture. Their identity as a wife and mother within private sphere is thrown overboard and they enter into hybrid hyphenated identity with adultery, infidelity, extramarital

relationships challenging the notion of family life. In the question of power balance between the previously the dominant and the subordinated gender, the new cosmopolitan synthesis is gaining ground in the contemporary culture.

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