

Women, Power, and the Film World in Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights*

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Abstract

Shobhaa De is one of the most remarkable Indian women fiction writers. Most of her novels and the characters in the novels deal with the psyche of the modern woman. She identifies the world of modern urban women, her protagonists are the perfect shadows of urban life and she portrays the world of Mumbai cinema. The society she highlights in her writings is patriarchal, and oppressive, giving rights to men, and severe treatment of women justified in the name of social systems. Men are born with respect, dignity, and worth whereas women are treated as profitable commodities. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies. Shobhaa De's novel focuses on the subjugation of women in Indian society. In a male-dominated society, generally, a woman is degraded to being a mere object. The women in the fictional works of Shobhaa De are to break this image. Her women are self-confident, dominating, and courageous in juxtaposition to their male counterparts. They are not docile and do not feel guilty about their relationships and attitudes.

Keywords: Commodity, Lesbianism, Predicament, Discrimination, Sex, Eroticism

In Indian Writing in English, Shobhaa De undeniably is one of the most notorious novelists. The urban people specifically those living in metropolitan cities like Mumbai have been bravely exhibited by De. Without any concealment, she gives a picture of the life of modern people. Her characters are not from the communal people living in the middle class nevertheless they belong to the elite class. Her courageous and frank outlining of sex in her fiction receives controversies however it is a distinctive feature of her personality.

Shobhaa De's fictional work mostly focuses on the sexual pleasure, lust, marriage, and love life of rich women in urban settings. She has played a variety of roles in her life as a model, journalist, and columnist. In the same way, she earned a good reputation also, but her literary works were not taken seriously in academic circles.

Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights* is the most controversial novel. It narrates the life of a Bollywood film star Aasha Rani, who comes from a village and becomes a famous star. Before becoming a film star, Aasha Rani was the child of a film producer. After her father's death, her mother pushes her into the underworld of blue films. For the sake of earning money, fame, and luxuries her mother uses her fifteen-year-old daughter, forcing her to be the bedmate of producers and distributors. She is scared of

the seedy people who are making the film. According to Italian scholar Alessandro Monti, *Starry Nights* is a novel about Bollywood's hellish life as he writes:

The safe measure is heavily discounted in the novel *Starry Nights* with its derogatory sequences of sthalas (places) devoted either to wholesale corruption or to temporary escapes from the Bollywood hell. *Starry Nights* makes a valuable test case, spotlighting as it does the career of the film star Aasha Rani, who wore her way to ephemeral stardom. The pressures the filmi milieu exacts on the heroine of *Starry Nights* are toned down to a more intimate quest for self-expression and identity. (PP 28-29)

Her sister is similarly gorgeous and ambitious than her. She is another victim of her mother's wretched game plans, to meet a tragic end of her career after a murderous attack by the henchmen film world's dons. They are exploited both sexually and sensually first by Akshay Arora and then by Amirchand Seth, Bombay's underworld don. The consequence subsequently goes one after the other.

The novel is heaving with different elements of feminism. Feminism, what we call "an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women," voiced in the novel has been observed differently by the novelist. Its purpose is not to convey a negation to accept the set of values moral codes and social norms made by the existing male-dominated society. The objective purpose of the fictional writer Shobhaa De is to portray a woman in society in the manner they live in modern society. Unlike R.N. Narayan in the *Dark Room*, Shobhaa De's female protagonists are not the women suffering in silence.

Asha Rani undergoes sexual relations with Akshay. She is an expert in sexual acts. When she starts massaging him between his thighs, Akshay expresses shock. Shobhaa De illustrates the situation, "And... his erection, had slowly begun massaging him between his thighs. She moved like...his chest, her breast moving above his face, her nipples occasionally brushing his lips. "You sexy woman,... learn all this? Akshay had groaned...to her ministrations". (SN P.18)

The novel ironically reflects many minor facts and situations of the film world. The role of mothers in the career-building of film heroines is often a matter of discussion. It is stated that any heroines could not develop their careers because of their mother's interference. Shobhaa De reflects on the fact, "Kishanbhai had reasoned that many a budding film career died too early because of interfering mothers. No one likes lafdas. Let him meet her first and then we'll see". Unwillingly amma

had allowed Asha Rani out of her sight. However only after warning her: Don't sign anything. Don't say anything. Do you as told. If the man says "dance" you dance. Do disco if he wants disco. Do Bharatanatyam if he wants Bharatnatyam. But do not go alone into a room with him. Do not take off your clothes". (P.20)

Vishnu M.D. is a powerful financier of the film world and a great womanizer. Kishanbhai persuades Asha to go for bedding with him to please him. Kishanbhai comes swiftly to her and says softly: "M.D. has a room...M.D. is an important man. Treat him nicely. He can help your career. Don't create a scene or anything. All you have to do is ... is ... what you do with me ... bas. It will be O.K. Tomorrow morning I will...home." Asha Rani pleaded...at Amma. Who'd dimply averted her". (P.27) He pulled her roughly into the bed and said to remove her clothes. Seeing her hesitation, he angrily said, "Saali rundi, Soona nahi? Behave like fucking virgin's bitches". (P.27)

The film world is more or less entirely devoid of morality. Even a mother of a film heroine or an extra-girl has no hesitation in sending their girl for bedding with others to grind their axes. De shares the experience of Asha with the readers, Kishanbhai sent her, Kishanbhai fetched her and in between, she didn't know what was happening. But once Asha Rani overheard a conversation between Amma and Kishanbhai. Amma was saying: "I don't mind...there; I know it's all... business. I trust you. But... health? These men,... right? Do you know... diseased? We must take Baby...check-up. We have some money now. You are keeping a... earnings, aren't you? (P.28)

Most of the film heroes and stars are double-faced desiring a domestic wife in a home and a fashionable girl outside the home. This is not only happened in De's fictional work but also in every movie world. They understand that a film may them any filmy end jeopardizing their family life. Akshay, like other heroes, also desires a homely wife and says, "I want a home-maker. Somebody who... my children. I don't... painted doll; some cheap film girl who... my friend. Malini is... woman for me."(P.40) Malini was a sober woman. She hated sex with Akshay who did tend to have a sadistic streak.

Akshay's inclination towards sex was abnormal, he "loved watching Swedish blue films- especially the more sadomasochistic variety. How could human beings behave this way? She'd wondered, averting her eyes from all the heaving bodies on the screen. She knew Akshay often masturbated in bed, and even that put her off. What was he some kind of insatiable monster? Could he

think of nothing but sex? The bed would shake rhythmically and she lay awake in the dark hating the man next to her, thinking, what does he do this? He has two children – two fine sons – isn't that enough? (P.43)

Malini further explains the word 'Sex' in her ways and says, "Sex! That is Sex! That is... use. Cheap... and let any sex man. sex! Perverts! You must be a pervert. What do... – hah! Suck his cock? Or suffocate... breast? He will get... of all the others". (P.49) Shobhaa De is once again concerned about the physical abuse of women in the field. The film Producers and directors often compelled them to show their naked bodies with an ulterior motive of appeasing their visual urge as well as attracting the filmgoers. She explains the situation faced by Asha Rani, "She had hesitated when all her buttons were opened. 'Brassiere, brassiere', the director had said, ' Quickly! Asha Rani had looked at Amma. She had gesticulated with her hand indicating how the bra was to be unhooked. Asha Rani had shut her eyes and reached for the clasp, Wah! She had heard the director say. After that, she hadn't registered anything. She had only responded to the directors. Along with her eyes, she'd also shut her mind". (P.54)

In part IV of the novel, the archetypal conservative attitude of a wife is emphasized by the novelist i.e. a wife or woman cannot share her husband or lover with another woman, she can put up with whatever but cannot bear the fact that her husband is involved in extra-marital relation. When Malini stares at Asha Rani with a sense of spying on her, Akshay blew at his to in anger "Bitch! Don't you know your place? Following me around, I don't like my women spying, you are a spy! Wanted to catch me with someone, don't you? Get out, get out!" (P.55) Malini heard the rebuke in silence and Asha Rani continued to stand there.

The criminalization of politics in Maharashtra has also been caricatured satirically by the novelist. The man with a criminal background and loose character are now mostly found in Politics. Seth Amirchan a Member of Parliament, claims to enter into politics being forced by the love of people. He lived in an ugly penthouse in Worli with a Muslim mistress a nautch –a girl from Lucknow, who had been rescued from a Bombay brothel by Seth's trusted lieutenant, also a Muslim, called Abbas Miya. The dancing girl, Lubna, had been living with Amirchand for almost five years but now she has become fat and undesirable. The Seth hence needs a change and looks for somebody new, young, slim, and preferably famous.

Asha Rani was called to satisfy the sexual urge of Sethjee. When she arrived there, a hijda came before her and removed her clothes quickly to check whether she was free of skin infection. He rubbed down her with diluted Dettol, checked her vagina, and inserted a diaphragm. He expertly inserted the diaphragm after asking her to lie back holding her knee in her hand and then he told her to turn over. When she objected, he said that he wanted to make sure his body was ready to receive Sethji. Then the hijda inserted a fingerful of jelly into her anus. When the Sethji came, he asked her to repeat a few words whose meanings she did not know and asked her to perform some acts she had not known and asked to perform some acts she had not performed before. Thereafter God knows what happened but she had been transported into a hallucinatory world. “She was weightless and floating. Her head was full of colours and sounds. Her senses had been heightened to an extent that she experienced no pain even when he entered her savagely from behind and whipped her with a small leather thong”. (P.61) Seth Amrichand was surrounded by a Topiwalla Brigade wearing white caps with a symbol – a Sudarshan chakra on them, it was also stated that he deployed his goods to settle any difference that might crop up with his adversaries. The Sudarshan chakra is a mere symbol denoting his ingeniously-designed weapon that beheaded many enemies who dared to stand against Seth. The list of people who had disappeared under the mysterious circumstances was quite large.

J.M. Waghmare writes about the works of Shobhaa De; “It is true that the woman’s body is much abused. Shobhaa De’s writing conveys the feeling of bitter helplessness. She cannot call even her body her own. She is an object of man’s lust and sexuality. She has nowhere to go. She is confined to the four corners of the house”. He further writes, “Shobhaa De’s *Starry Nights* sprinkles rose-coloured light on the darkness which has enveloped a film actress, Aasha Rani. Her odyssey to stardom is most painful. She experiences emptiness at every step of her life. She swims across pent-up emotions”. About the protagonists, he writes:

The protagonists of the fictional works of Shobhaa De have some sort of schism in their souls. They do not have a cohesive and positive identity of their own. Their voices vibrate with profound grief and anguish. They suffer from a deep sense of betrayal and alienation. Their identities have cracks in them. This is the burden of the song of their life. (P.12)

Jeremy Hawthorn gives his opinion on the feminist approach. He says “Feminist critics have argued that not only have women had to overcome severe difficulties to become writers, but that once they have produced novels these have consistently been read in negative ways by male readers” (P.82)

And, according to Rosalind Miles, “The sex of a novelist is always in question somewhere, sometime in the course of the critical response – the sex of a woman novelist, that is, whatever a woman produces as a writer, she is still judged as a woman” (P.5).

The aforesaid opinions have some points of validity no doubt, but they cannot be held as conclusive. There are other critics too who have the same opinion about the novel, the novelist, and the feminist writings and writers.

Conclusion

Eventually, the novel ends with an optimistic suggestion for womankind through the protagonist that “let us not lose hope” because it is a universal truth that, “Lose heart, lose all” (If you will lose heart, you will lose all). She also wishes to change the prevalent view, “Man dreams of fame, while woman wakes to love”, as the blurb says, Aasha Rani “Sweetheart of Millions” makes one fatal career move: she falls in love that abolishes the whole thing she achieved after seven long years of exploitation”. The extract reiterates the notion of caution to women. Asha Rani’s life is an account of survival and success along with a consuming love, which is passionate.

To conclude, Shobhaa De’s *Starry Nights* is a narrative tale of a Bollywood cine star Aasha Rani. She chooses the way of struggling and surviving through it without escaping from life’s responsibilities. In her career as a film star, she has undergone many problems and pains until now she never left the film world. The cinematic world is so pathetic that it can destroy the moral values of any human being. Even in her struggling life, Asha succeeds. Through *Starry Nights*, De paints the woman’s search for selfhood in a male-dominated society. Male- dominant society is continuously ready to abuse, exploit, and ferment them within the boundaries of and outside of the family. Thus she states the marginal position of women through different types of women characters.

The feeling of eroticism in De’s novel shows the new liberated women, who want an equal position with a man. Linda and Aasha Rani share the appearances of the new woman and seek accomplishment within their relationship. De depicts the picture of the relationship between women which is a truthful picture of the reality in the fast-moving modern world. Lesbianism has completely made women independent of men. Shobhaa De, in this novel, criticizes the hypocrisy of the film people who come from upper-class society. They try to hide their real personalities with money and power.

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