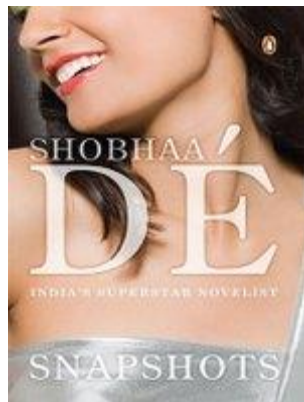


“Revolutionary” Women in *Snap Shots* of Shobha De

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Abstract

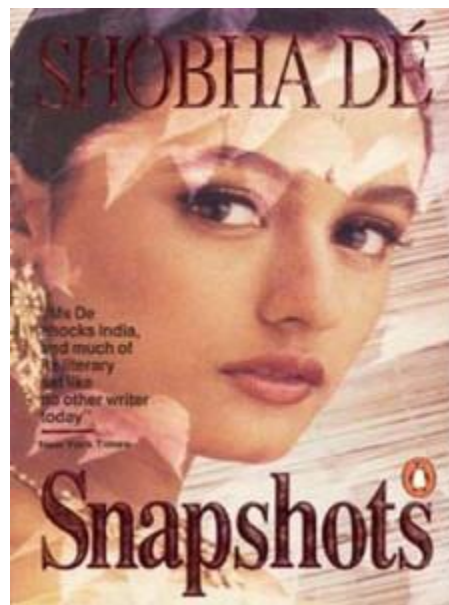
This paper discusses the revolutionary sexual practices of the major women characters in the novel ‘Snap Shots’ of Shobha De. Shobha De is a controversial Indo- Anglian novelist who challenges the traditional values of Womanhood. To her credit, are more than seventeen novels. Most of her women characters are not conservative, not male dependent but revolutionary. For them, money matters most. They never fail to assert and assume economic independence . These characters look awkward, strange and unacceptable to the orthodoxicals and the traditionals. Through her characters, she celebrates and glorifies sex in most of her novels. Sex is not a taboo for her. The major women characters in the novel ‘Snap Shots’ are postmodern and they belong to the group called ‘New Women’. This novel is about the reunion of six women who were classmates in school. They meet to recollect their dirty past and present. For them it is not dirty it is not a taboo. De presents the sexual revolution against the conventional sexual practices. The major women characters in this novel are all revolutionary in their approach to life.

Key words: sex, taboo, patriarchal domination, subordination, traditional and revolutionary.

Introduction

Most of the modern novels differ from the traditional novels in picturing the significance of life. In the traditional novel, major Women characters were highly domestic, caring the promotion of family and willingly subjugating themselves to the head of the family. Sacrifice, fidelity and devotion to family were their slogan. They showed no murmur or resistance even if they were ill treated. Indeed they were silent women. That was the culture of that day. Today, there is a cultural change and the rising change in the culture of the metropolitan cities and particularly among the modern women finds a place in the modern novel in India. Morality is redefined in terms of social and economic status. Emancipation from rigid moral codes and freedom from religion are all found in the self-expression of the modern women.

The Emergence of New Woman



In 1960s, with the rise of feminism, there emerged the New Woman, who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. In their novels, the appearance of the new, fully awakened woman are ready to fight against the patriarchal norms in order to live an independent life, is a recent phenomenon. The female characters created by these novelists do not accept the low secondary status in a male-dominated Indian society.

Women in *Snapshots*

Shobha De, in her novels, depicts the uprising cultural change and the defiant practices of

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modern women through her women characters in the cities. Her novel 'Snapshots' can be interpreted in different manners, but what fits it best is a reality novel wherein through fictitious characters upon a platform, reality is depicted. Clearly the writer had the urban and the high-class reader in mind when she presents her characters. She introduces characters one-by-one in each chapter at the start of the novel. Her characters are a mix of actors, socialites, aristocrats and high-class housewives.

The book's jacket reveals to us that six old friends meet over lunch and it is here that a lot of dark secrets are discovered and confessions made. What catches a reader's interest is the part which talks about the evil running behind the "smooth" lives of all these friends.

Reunion and Recollection

Snapshots is about six school friends who as women reunite at a party to recollect their past school life and share their present. They are Aparna, Reema, Noor, Surekha, Rashmi and Swati. They all meet at Reema's house. The world of *Snapshots* is a world entirely dominated by women. All the six are urban, self-sufficient, economically independent and confident women. They seem to want to prove that they are not just commodities in the hands of men but they too have identities of their own. Marriage can no longer prevent them from being independent even in sex.

They opened their conversation with their school picnic photographs. Seeing the photographs, Reema admired at her own attractive legs of the past. But of late, she has begun to hate her fatty legs. Reema locked the door and showed her legs to them. From their leg-show, they moved on to the topic of their school life, their boyfriends and the feel for self-assertion for keeping their identity.

Their experiences form the subject matter of the novel. It is through their behaviour and conversation that the novelist throws significant light on the predicament of women in India. Their get-together to recall their past is the central action of the novel. Since they are meeting after years, they all talk freely about their past and the present love-affairs. The men characters like Rohit, Prem, Balbir, Raju play a minimum role and they are marginalized.

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Aparna, the Corporate Woman

Aparna, the owner of a Maruti car and an ad agency, is an example of successful business woman who is unable to bear Rohit's (her husband) deserting her. She learns sex from Prem, her own employee. The novel opens with a revolutionary and erotic beginning. The very first line, 'Prem liked to make love in public places', suggests the oncoming revolutionary erotic explorations in the novel. She discovered her sexual potentiality only in the companionship of her employee Prem. It was all because the money-minded Rohit had let her down, high and dry. She was all in love for Rohit but he was loveless and did not attend to her emotional needs. But Aparna, as a postmodern woman, rises to get, what she wants, from her own employee. She had no love for Prem. It was only lust and lust only that quenched her biological urge because of her helpless condition and the poor sexual environment at home.

Aparna is let down by Rohit, her divorced husband, and just because of that she does not want to be condemned to a dark room. She decides to live, love and lust. She emerges as a woman who is very much after sex, money and reputation and for achieving the same, she uses Prem her creative director and imaginative lover. For both Aparna and Prem, it was an extra-marital relationship. Aparna and Prem worked well as colleagues but as lovers, Aparna was 'beginning to discover her sexual potential' (De p.6) only in the physical relationship and the companionship of Prem.

Reema, an Incestuous Person

Reema's first boyfriend was Raju. He was an unemployed and uneducated drop-out. She had undergone abortion ten times. In the case of Aparna and Prem, it was an extra marital affair, but for both Raju and Reema it was a pre-marital experience. For this woman, undergoing abortions was like any other everyday activity.

After making Reema pregnant, Raju disappeared from her life saying he was a minor but Reema was not disappointed or shocked. After her college studies, Reema married Ravi, a prosperous business man. He was insensitive to her feelings. Ravi was almost Rohit of Aparna in matters of sex. So she developed an incestuous relationship with Raindhir, the brother of Ravi and enacted multiple sexual encounters with him. For Reema, place of sex is of least concern,

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whether it is lift or hotel, but the spirit of sex and satisfying the personal urge with no secrecy is the chief concern in life.

Noor, the Incestuous

Noor's parents were always engaged in extra-marital affairs. Her boyfriend Aamir had deserted her. Noor's physical relationship with her brother Nawaz is unacceptable to the society. Noor took a long time to realize that their relationship was unusual and abnormal. But even after that, she wasn't entirely convinced. When she was teased by her friends whether she was a woman, she committed suicide. She was the only unmarried woman of the six who embraced unnatural death.

Rashmi of Multiple Relationship

Rashmi is another character in the novel, who also leads a "liberated" life on economic considerations. She is an actress who keeps on to hold multiple relationship. Rashmi managed Pips for sometime but their relationship did not last long. Junior Pips had grown up in the company of grown up 'Uncles'. 'When Max the German was gone, Younes came from Algeria to take his place'. She had decided to bind Younes down, seal his exit and block his escape routes. She performs sexual encounters for pleasure, for money and shelter, ignoring the moral norms and societal ethics.

Surekha, the Lesbian

Surekha's mother-in-law was a nuisance to her family life. Surekha complained that there was no private room in her house. She could not do anything without the knowledge of her mother-in-law. Reema advised Surekha to avoid her mother-in-law but make her husband completely dependent on her.

Reema advised:

"You just have to assert yourself once. Once your husband becomes a hundred percent dependent on you, he won't look elsewhere. Men always liked their comforts and men are spoilt lazy babies. Feed them well ... That's the way to keep them under control. The rest is easy. Believe me-I was in your shoes, not so long ago." (De p.151). Perhaps, this is the

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“new” woman’s estimate of man.

When Noor exposed Surekha’s lesbian relationship with Dolly, Surekha vigorously questioned whether two women couldn’t be friends. Surekha countered further that Dolly had no liking for men and their relationship was divine and nobody should misunderstand that.

Swati, the Sex Bomb

The portrait of Swati in *Snapshots* is a further illustration of the “new” woman’s self-confidence in exploring her potentialities. London-based Swati never feels any scruples to act in dirty English films as long as she gets her money. Swati, the sex symbol, is the wife of Juan, Mendonca, an eccentric millionaire, Latin American, who keeps Swati as an animal in a zoo. She cohabits with anyone who comes her way, as sex is her religion.

Swati’s ups and downs did not deter her from leading a life of her own choice, irrespective of the views of others and the moral concerns of the society. She admitted of her modeling and whoring while in London after her divorce.

About sex, she admits,

‘We don’t suppress it. We don’t dismiss it. We don’t find it dirty. Sex doesn’t threaten us ... I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, chastity. It’s pathetic’ (De p. 165).

At the end, Aparna sensed the bugging in the house of Reema where the reunion was taking place. It was learnt that Swati had ventured this bugging and snooping, on a request from a Hong Kong based British script writer for an interesting material on a contemporary subject for which she was assured, a fabulous offer of becoming an actress and amassing money and attaining reputation. For money, she could do anything, did not hesitate to betray even her friends and their hidden sexual life. Swati had collected the data of their past and the present sexual life for her serial, ‘Sisters of the Sub-Continent.’ She had damaged their lives. There was a heavy hue and cry and they all cursed Swati. Thus their reunion was a total confusion and retraction

Women Characters in *Snapshots*

Naturally, the women characters in ‘Snapshots’ appear more powerful than their male counterparts. They exercise and exhibit their sense of freedom in their thoughts, expressions, actions and even in maintaining sexual relationships. Swati observes :

‘Sex isn’t filthy, Our minds make it so. Look at Khajuraho, Konarak... have any of you studied the Kama Sutra ?Fascinating. It’s a pity we got brainwashed by some frustrated repressed idiots, I think sex is a celebration- the highest form of religion’ (De p.164).

Wrath against Men

The “new” woman wants the men to depend on them and they are prepared to use them as sex toys to find pleasure. They want money, pleasure, reputation, economic independence, sex at their will and openly fight against the domination of men over women. To avoid the domination of men, they are ready to lead a life of freedom from the societal clutches. By any means, self-Identity is their prime concern.

Aparna’s mother also dislikes the typical behaviour of husbands. She says,

“All they do is come home, put their feet up and order their women around.” Get me this! Do that. Do this. When Aparna tells her mother that the modern husbands are different, the mother adds:

“Believe me – all men are just the same. And Indian husbands, the worst” (De p.202).

When ill-treated by their insensitive life partners, “new” women generalise that all men are cruel. Their frustration forces them to choose extra-marital or lesbian relationships. The main aim of these upper-class women is to enjoy life. They give no care to the rules of the traditional society and the joint family system. Boldly, they break the social norms and the moral codes and simultaneously keep the parents--in-law away and tame the husband or break the marriage and are prepared to lead a new luscious life without brooding over the past.

Most of the women in the novel except Noor are married early and are frustrated and

bored with their husbands. So, they seek new relationships outside marriage and challenge the patriarchal set up. They challenge the male domination. Champabai, the brothel owner in *Snapshots* says to Rashmi that money, the great leveler alone can provide independence and economic self-sufficiency to women.

A glutton takes any amount of food at any time in any place, so are the Shobha De's women portrayed in *Snapshots*. They talk, take and give sex as food to anybody and with anybody, anytime at anyplace to achieve their economic and biological needs. Shobha De's women characters are not timid and conventional. They rebel and challenge the patriarchal culture by their free and frank sexual behaviour.

They frankly talk about love, sex and free sex. They are all postmodern, New women. They prefer their own pleasure, needs and desires. For them, Sexual pleasure is a basic need, like food. They talk about the sex, sex and sex only and nothing else. Either they want to live an isolated life free from the patriarchal norms or want to have the company of men to have sex with them to enjoy their lives.

Tradition Vs Modernity

The six friends in the novel are completely free from the traditional social customs and values. They disregard male power totally by breaking the norms of traditional female behaviour. They feel that there is nothing wrong in seeking new relationships outside marriage and challenging the patriarchal system.

Conclusion

Shobha De is an Indian novelist who is not afraid of revealing the hidden secrets of ugly and unnatural sexual practices of the Metropolitan women. Such writers protest and condemn the subordination and marginalization of women and so their characters are rebellious, deviant and wholly the opposite of traditional women. De's women may be considered too modern and sophisticated, westernized and, above all, characterless. Such characters are very minimum in number in real Indian society and De does not generalize that all women are the same. From her novels, we can come to the conclusion that Indian culture is

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undergoing a change in certain social and economic classes. That cultural change, De depicts.

De's Style

De's style is direct and forceful and she calls a spade a spade. She has her own knack of picturing people, events and places. De has tremendous command over English. Use of 'Hinglish' is her bold attempt. There is no curtain or pretension, neither on the part of the author nor on the part of her characters. She is an expert in depicting both the inner and the outer mind of her characters. She is a realist and realism reveals in her novels and she is revolutionary in challenging the male constructed taboo. "She is undoubtedly the most reactionary novelist" (Dodiya, p 15). Thus, De depicts the revolutionary behaviour of the woman characters in revolutionary scenes with a revolutionary language.

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