

Freedom from Traditional Image in Shobhaa De's Novels

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Abstract

Shobhaa De is one of the most eminent and popular Indian novelists of the present time. Living almost among the upper class society, De has unravelled the events and happenings of her life from different angles. Her works reveal the transformation of actual experiences. They are not transferred as they might have occurred, but she leaves it to her readers to sense them. De turns the spotlight on the new morality that has finally set in and on the new neo-colonial generation who have no inhibitions or age-old cultural bonds. In this way, she depicts a realistic picture of the morality and culture of the high society of contemporary India. This paper is an attempt to show that how through her revolutionary theme Shobhaa De probes into the secret depth of the women psyche and how women characters in her novels are ready to smash their traditional image. De seems to reject and deconstruct man-made images of women, which cannot be changed or exchanged according to this male dominated society at will.

Key Words: New Colonial, New Morality, Age-old cultural bonds, Traditional Image

Change is everywhere and a significant change is always needed. In modern times, if there is one word which characterizes our world, the word is change. Change in political life - change in economic life - change in social life - change in personal life. Change is the hallmark of our times. In present day scenario, the influence of western countries in India has taken leaps and bounds. In a traditional society like India, certainly, much of the culture that is a part of the daily lives of people is affected by western culture. For example, the eating habits of metropolitan Indians have been affected by mass-produced fast food and imported cuisine. Similarly, Valentine's Day came and went almost unmarked in the Indian calendar, which is already so full of all kinds of festivals and feasts. But having

western influence it has become trend of celebrating special days like Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and so on.

Now a days, there are many areas of culture which have registered a dramatic growth, are practiced, or at least attempted, by millions of Indian. Many prominent areas have been profoundly affected by the materialistic precepts of West. Western mores are not only penetrating the most insulated aspects of culture, but also creating new patterns of behaviour, supplanting older value-systems. With globalization, more and more areas of our culture are directly influenced either it is music, art, political arena or literature. The culture of music, dance, theatre, cinema, art, and literature--likewise, is now pursuing western way of life more vigorously than ever

before. The present paper aims to show that how change has occurred in Literature also.

Literature, the most essential medium through which a writer can easily provide an exact record of human life, society, and its systems helps to explore and examine the people in the present social set-up. The relationship between literature and society is reciprocal. But a female writer, in every part of the world including India, is expected to write only the romantic narrative dealing with the theme of love and romance leading to conventional marriage. She is always pressurized to write something within the traditional and cultural boundaries of her sex without caring her desire to write about any subject that appeals to her. In addition, if they want to know something in depth, it will be usually the story of women's exploitation. Nevertheless, people are not ready to digest a woman's frank views on bold topics that explore the sign of cultural decay. They are more interested in reading about *Mehandi* (it is used to colour the hands in order to show happiness of marriage at Hindu festivals), *Roli* (colour-combination applied in worshipping God), *Dholak* (it is brought into function in singing the marriage and festival songs). A woman writer's predominance is confined only in the areas of emotional experience. Conservative readers cannot tolerate a woman writer to go against the established socio-cultural barriers of feminine modesty. Marry Ellman in her book, *Thinking about Woman*, writes that women's work is often expected to be charming and sweet (as a woman should be), whereas men's work is supposed to be serious and significant. Ellman's point is that “. . . men have

traditionally chosen to write in an assertive, authoritarian mode, whereas women have been confined to the language of sensibility” (qtd. in Toril Moi 1985, 34).¹ These conservative readers are not ready to accept the social and cultural changes, which have begun slowly through the passing of time. However, there are some female novelists who have presented the corrosion of the traditional heritage of India. In fact, these female writers are attempting to show the age-old imbalance. They are reflecting on a new social order through the full range of their experiences. They are describing those changes in the socio-economic conditions that have altered patriarchal attitudes to gender-discrimination.

In this respect Shobhaa De, writing on the accounts of her first marriage and divorce, her familiarity with people of upper class society and sharing the experiences of her own traditional, middle-class family, has come to literary circle bringing forth the cultural change in Indian society. She, from the core of her heart, has tried to tell the true picture of the present society; she has dared to speak boldly about the hypocrisy of these upper class people. Many critics have criticised her for her frank views on sex, but she courageously unveils the superficiality of the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal system. Her works reveal the bare truth and the naked exposure of society. Ignoring the outcry against the use of sexuality in her novels, she writes continuously about the female desires. “Had my books been written by a man they would have been called ‘provocative’ or even ‘courageous’ says De. ‘But because it’s a woman who is writing they become

pornography” (quot. in Vrinda Nabar 1996, 16).²

Shobhaa De has often been disapproved of her bold writing, her language, and her personal vision in which she appears to create a new morality, challenging the conventional male conception of it. However, in her novels, one can get the true and the naked exposure of metropolitan society. In order to present the metropolitan high life as it is, De has adopted a language to speak of its hidden reality as the people use in their lives.

Being essentially a media person, Shobhaa De is aware of the inside aspects of Bollywood’s dark secrets, movie stars’ follies, and celebrity neuroses. None of these escape her unsparing eyes while picturing them in her works. De turns the spotlight on the new morality that has finally set in, and on the new neo-colonial generation who has no inhibitions or age-old cultural bonds manifested in its highly Westernized behaviour. In this way, she depicts a realistic picture of the morality and culture of the high and the upper middle class societies of contemporary India.

As a writer of social comedy of high-class society, Shobhaa De is matchless because very few contemporary Indian women writers can present social reality with matching satirical observation. Using the language of satire, she brings forth tellingly the life style and thoughts of upper class society. The people are presented as they are, not as they should have been. As part of the same society, she has succeeded wonderfully in communicating the ‘feel’ of

that society to a common reader, who may not belong to that group. Her novels seem to read like fictionalised journalism rather than the work of much imagination or of introspection. She, as a versatile writer, explores the different areas like politics, media, personalities, recent books and so on. Because of liveliness in her depiction of the social drama, her work has achieved remarkable response, not only from several European countries but also from all over the world.

In this manner, Sagarika Ghose also feels that Shobhaa De’s work is typical of modern Indian sensibility and brings out the new India in print. She comments: “The point is that as far as those hungry to see New India in print are concerned, she is a literary and sociological pioneer. . . . De’s work dispenses with the quest for an Indian identity and centers around the world she knows, the people she meets and the conversations she has” (1996, 13).³ Similarly, for David Davidar, her works are serious attempts at “Discovering India through Indian eyes” (1991, 43).⁴

If a reader goes through De’s work, he or she will find that almost all the characters of Shobhaa De believe in external actions, so there is less of psychological conflict and resultant analysis in her novels. They are busy in getting power at any cost. Materialistic concern is more important for them than spiritual and intellectual considerations. Consequently, internal conflict is minimum in her characters. However, Sagarika Ghose writes, “She is India’s first determinedly anti-intellectual woman writer in English, who has the guts

and, equally importantly, the looks to create an Alternative to the metropolitan high brow literary establishment” (1996, 13).⁵

For her candidness, Shashi Tharoor comments, Shobhaa De depicts “an India almost no one has written about within the covers of a novel” (1990, 16).⁶ She is a socio-literary pioneer for those readers who want to see New India in books. She depicts the incidents in frank narration and absolute open-heartedness. A true picture of society with all its weaknesses and limitations has been presented by her. She has explored the modernity of contemporary society and exposed the prevailing conservatism under the guise of morality. The views of young generation on sex and how only the enjoyment of life has become the main goal of these upper middle class men and women, have been revealed by De. As one turns towards the close of the twentieth century, one can see how the meaning of independence has been misinterpreted as complete sexual freedom. In this context, Bijay Kumar Das comments on De’s characters:

Shobhaa De dives deep into the hearts of the liberated upper-class women in the contemporary society and depicts her characters as they are and not as they should have been. Shobhaa De seems to say that sex is a part of life and in order to accept life one has to affirm sensuality. She is not concerned with the traditional concept of morality and purity in love. 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 people are presented in their true colours - what they are rather than what they should have been (1997, 166).⁷

In a nutshell, Shobhaa De who in Indian English literature among affluent, globe-trotting, international writers has pursued the new calling to emerge as one of the most popular women writers. As I earlier discussed that using a narration that can be described a social satire, she has tried to present before us the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern high class society in which men and women long for material pleasure and want to move freely. She presents how these modern men and women, in their obsession with modernity, become willing victims of success and materialism. In her novels, her characters, who stand first at crossroads between what is right and what is wrong, finally get a true vision of life, which is full of responsibilities. Through her writing work, Shobhaa De wants to make it clear that only in aping modern views cannot give fulfillment to their lives but they have to revisualize themselves. Having their own individual feelings, these people should begin to see life from a different and mature angle. With the better vision of life, they should understand that what can be the real purpose to survive. Thus, in this paper, an attempt is made to show how Shobhaa De, dealing with bold subject matter and having a realistic approach, she is showing life with a better vision in which people can survive with a real purpose.

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