

The strength of a woman is not measured by the impact that all her hardships in life have had on her; but the strength of a woman is measured by the extent of her refusal to allow those hardships to dictate her and who she becomes.

— [C. Joy Bell C](#)



The roles that the women are playing in the twenty first century India are phenomenal. They have come a long way from being just a daughter, a wife, a mother to potent forces that are shaping the country. They have crossed the threshold of their homes and stepped out into different professions that are significantly important for the economics of the country. Everyone is aware of Indira Nooyi, Swati Piramal, Falguni Nayar, Chanda Kochar and their likes who have carved a niche for themselves and are taking full advantage of the fruits of globalization. This has been possible because of education which has given this new found independence. They now have a room of their own from the vantage point of which they speak a language of Independence. This was echoed many decades ago by Simone de Beauvoir who had said that “the independent woman is one who like men can move from immanence to transcendence in her public life activities and avoid sadomasochistic relationships in her personal life” (670). This comes from her feminist treatise *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she has ripped apart the veneer of prevalent social order and has tried to instill that sense of grit and rebellion in women that is needed to fight against male hegemony. Culminating the long standing debate begun by writers such as Margaret Fuller in the nineteenth century, Beauvoir also asserts that women can only free themselves by “thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as men” (727). It is obvious that thought is changed by education and ability to work and create comes from the power that is thus generated.



Indira Nooyi



Swati Piramal



Chanda Kochhar



Shobha De



Falguni Nayar



Zia Mody



Renu Sud Karnad

(Managing Partner, AZB & Partners)



Ritu Kumar

(Fashion Designer)

(HDFC Managing Director)



Debjani Ghosh

(Intel's South Asia Managing
Director, Sales and Marketing)



Neha Kirpal

(Founder and Director of the India Art Fair)



Leena Nair

(Executive Director, HR,
Hindustan Unilever)



Renuka Ramnath



Tanya Dubash

(Founder, Multiples Alternate Asset Management)



Sangeeta Pendurkar

(Managing Director, Kellogg's India)



Schauna Chauhan Saluja

(CEO, Parle Agro)



Arathi Krishna

(Joint MD, Sundram Fasteners)

(Executive Director & President (Marketing),
Godrej Group)



Archana Hingorani

(CEO, IL&FS Investment Manager)



Aisha De Sequeira

(MD and Head, Investment
Banking, Morgan Stanley India)



Meher Pudumjee

(Thermax Chairperson)



Kirthiga Reddy
(Head, Facebook's India Operations)



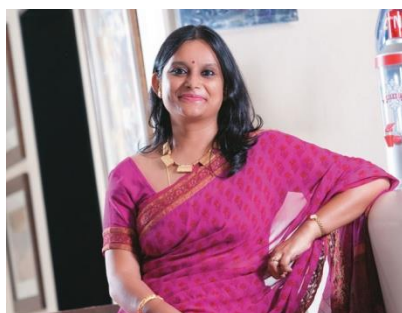
Zarin Daruwala
(Head of Wholesale banking,
ICICI Bank Ltd)



Jyotsna Suri
(Chairperson and Managing Director, Bharat Hotels)



Ekta Kapoor
(Joint MD, Balaji Telefilms)



Abanti Sankaranarayanan
(MD, Diageo India)



Vinita Gupta
(CEO, Lupin Pharmaceuticals Inc)



Aruna Jayanthi
(India CEO, Capgemini)



Chiki Sarkar
(Publisher, Penguin Books India)



Lynn De Souza
(Chairman and CEO of Lintas Media Group)



Nita Ambani



Vinita Bali
(MD, Britannia Industries)

Earlier, because of unawareness and primarily due to traditional bondages women had willy-nilly agreed to subordinate themselves; and because of their lack of resources had taken the unequal distribution of power between man and woman as being predestined. Susan Moller Okin in *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989) sums this up very succinctly

When we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and both physical and economic security constructed inequalities between them, right down the list.(136)

What has happened today has been a redistribution of resources which has enabled a woman to gain a semblance of equality and shaken the shackles of dominance. Due to their strident endeavor to get out of the subaltern syndrome, women today are also breaking the walls between the object and the subject position. It was this that was the root cause of their oppression and clearly, linked to their body and to sexuality. Such notions are now being reconceptualized. But this is true of urban, middle class working women alone and we restrict to those and the texts referred to are by and about this seeming minority. We say *seeming* because the reality of new India is that a much larger percentage of women are working than is statistically recognized.

Women continue to play a marginal and peripheral role despite constituting almost half the population with a critical role in production and social processes. The initiative taken by the early social reformers did resolve certain basic issues about the socialization process which resulted in better opportunities for education, employment, earnings, empowerment and entitlement to property but still there is a long way to go and the fight against the long standing prejudices has yet not been resolved. Women in India still face enormous pressure to conform to social mores and the need to conform to traditional roles within families poses a barrier. Though women have made great strides in the corporate world in the last three decades, they are still too often discouraged from having careers that infringe too much on family life. On the other hand, it is also true that women who have achieved academically and

economically are seen to be smart and savvy, often not in a positive way. Working women from the lower classes often take their economic independence too literally and fall a prey to violence but harassment at the work place is a pan-global phenomenon and India has its share of the evil. However, there is another side to the question. It is widely observed that earning power has allowed women to find a voice and form opinions of their own; women are increasingly becoming aware that a career will not cost them the neglect of their family and children but allow them greater power to spend not only on others but on themselves as well.

The new situation in which Indian women are now finding themselves in has made them more vocal about their experiences and writing about their felt worth has changed over the years. Gone are the days when women had to write under pseudonyms or write what was expected of them. Today, women can talk about anything and write it as easily. From Baby Halder, a domestic help who transcribes her life (*A Life Less Ordinary* 2006), the harshness of growing up- oppressed to Ravathi, a hijra telling the truth about herself, to Sagarika Ghosh, a journalist (*The Gin Drinkers* 1998) who writes about her experiences as does Barkha Dutt to others from different professions the writerly scape is growing every day. There are those who have received acclaim as novelists in their own right such as Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapoor, Gita Hariharan, Jaishree Mishra, Kiran Desai, and those who are in different professions and translate their experiences into the printed page for the world to recognize their being and becoming.

Women writers are a major force to reckon with and form a good seventy per cent of English writing in India. This is largely because of the opportunities that women have been given and the reforms enacted in the past couple of decades especially in the field of education. As a result of promoting women's education more and more girls belonging to the middle class graduated and entered into the job market. Undoubtedly, they were subjugated and not only were the women's jobs considered secondary to the men's but also they were economically not at parity with the men's job- Nurses, teachers, stenographers and bank clerks was what they began with but gradually the new working woman made her mark and today through several years of agitation, litigation and gender sensitization as well as sexual

harassment she has acquired a status of her own and at parity with her working counterparts. Today it seems that in India gender has become irrelevant in the new professions and as the world opens up wider and wider opportunities are increasing for those who have made ambition their prime goal in life. The old struggles are now irrelevant to the new age women and it seems that the Indian woman has definitely come of age. If we look at the writing and the publishing industry in India we witness a sea change, a complete face-over. Women are gathering more laurels and their work are being appreciated for the precision, the meticulousness and the added humane touch which has delivered more goods than even before.

Travelling down the history lane from a Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt through the wide-reigning realm of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande to the now overly popular Diasporic writers on the one hand and ‘chick lits’ like Shobha De on the other, one is appalled by the quantum of output. And today in the era of *Metro Reads* one finds women from different professions trying to make a new mark through the narration of their diverse experiences- a woman from the media writing her reportage, a bank CEO, a head of a food industry, from the science and technology sector, from those in the upcoming call centers, everyone has a lot to lend to the feminist discourse of the day.

This chapter takes as its focus young Indian women writers and their largely revolve around their own area of experience. The foremost name that comes to the ken is Shobha De- a Bombayite, a socialite and a part of the elite glitterati. Her works reflect her attitude to life, her station in society and her world view.

Shobha De was born in January 1948 to a supportive parentage of Justice Govind Hari Rajadhyaksha and his benevolent wife Mrs. Indira Govind Rajadhyaksha, of Saraswat Brahmin community, in Satara, Maharashtra. At the time of her birth when Shobha De was born her father was a special magistrate in Satara, but very soon he was promoted as an Assistant Solicitor to the Government of India at the centre in Delhi and later on became the joint Secretary in ministry of law at Mumbai. She is

the daughter of that conservative family in which a female child is regarded as a liability to the family whereas the birth of a male child is celebrated. Shobha De presents this situation so tellingly. When her brother Ashok was born, the eldest sister Mandakini had an auspicious kumkum hand impression imprinted on her back. When Shobha De was born, her elder sister Kunda also expected the same celebration but met with a withering snap from their maternal grandmother: “What? You want kumkum on your back? Go and fetch some cow-dung instead. Do you realize there are three daughters in the family now? Three, weren’t two enough?” (*Selective Memory*, 32)

Shobha De was educated in Delhi and Bombay. She graduated from St. Xavier’s College, Bombay, with a B.A. degree in Psychology and Sociology. Shobha is introduced to the field of modeling by Shashi Banker and worked as a model, because it provides her enough money equivalents to that of full-fledged salary and the feeling of independence. It was Mr. Nari Hira, a Sindhi businessman who introduced her to the field of writing in 1970 with *Stardust*, through her friend Shilpa Shah, who asked her “can you write?” (84) De says, “I didn’t choose modeling, it chose me. I didn’t choose writing, writing chose me” (76). *Stardust* shows her credible level of objectivity about society and her experiences about film people who are in her eyes are heartless. Since 1970, she founded and edited three popular magazines *Stardust*, *Society*, and *Celebrity* and is Consulting Editor to *Sunday* and *Megacity*. She enjoys writing like her independence. She earned both name and fame while working as a free-lance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines.

After the failure of *Celebrity*, the magazine edited and published by Shobha De, which led to her financial bankruptcy, isolation and even divorce from her first husband Sudhir, the superstitious streak in De “compelled her to search her titles that begin with ‘S’, the first alphabet of her name” (Adhikari, 284). Inspired by the success of her first novel *Socialite Evenings*, she begins the title of all her writings with ‘S’. So far Shobha De has published fifteen books out of which seven are novels. *Selective Memory* has helped the reader to understand much about the writer, why she writes the way she does of what she does. Her novels and short stories, her television serial *Swabhimaan* and *Sukanya* and her news paper columns,

are all, she admits, inspired by and based upon people, incidents, experiences and emotions in her own life. The dark side of human nature, the squalor and the evil in the society and in human relationships that Shobha De explores in her fiction are, it becomes evident as she narrates of her vision of her life, the product of her own middle class puritanical upbringing, which has always kept her an outsider in that glittering “upper crust” world into which she has been thrust (or has thrust herself) (*Selective Memory*, 330-331). The rewriting of her life enables Shobha De as the narrator/author of her text to reinterpret the multitude of social and cultural codes imprinted on the personal consciousness.

Her individualistic and idiosyncratic views on social aspects of life in *Surviving Men* and *Socialite Evenings*, her emphasis on sex in *Starry Nights*, the depiction of the new woman in *Sisters* and other works are dealt at length by Shobha De herself in her autobiography *Selective Memory*. One very important aspect of the autobiography is Shobha De’s handling of the language as signifying her gender consciousness. Barthes points out, an autobiography is “really a novel that does not speak its name” (Cronin, 254-78) and it is as much fiction as novel proper. Interestingly Karuna’s character in *Socialite Evenings* bears a close resemblance with the facts in Shobha De’s life. Facts of Karuna’s life in the novel under consideration such as her childhood, education, trip to New York find a place in De’s *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*, written on being fifty years. *Socialite Evenings* bears a marked resemblance to the story of Shobha De- only the name has been changed from Shobha to Karuna. Similarly these details find place in her latest book *Superstar India: From Incredible to Unstoppable*. Sharad Srivastava observes:

In India also women authors have boldly come out with intimate details of their lives in their autobiographies. When women could talk so freely about themselves, it was natural that they would be more uninhibited in their writings, especially in their novels (Srivastava, 81).

In *Selective Memory* there is an attempt at demolishing the male ego while writing about males. Instead of submitting to the general male-centric view of woman as merely erotic objects she discovers males as insecure who “feel terribly threatened by self-sufficient women” (*Socialite Evenings*, 88). The

same feminist views here depict males through an animal imaginary associating the power and option of taming the animals with women. She refers to a man in disapproval: “the man was a dog. A rabid one. I didn’t see myself as a lamp-post” (*Selective Memory*, 97). Similar utterances are there in her fiction (that can be read as concealed autobiography) like *Socialite Evenings* where “Ritu confesses to Karuna the lesson that men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment” (Samanta, 81).

De proverbially speaking sowed the wind by launching her lust-laced *Socialite Evenings* and reaped a whirlwind, in turn with the phenomenal release of her *Starry Nights*, her orgiastic marvel that virtually caused to the puritans of art much heart burning, wrathful introspection and bitter pangs of sour-grapes. Shobha De’s *Starry Nights* in the light of contemporary feminist critical theories put forth by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Taking a cue from M. H. Abrams much-celebrated *The Mirror and the Lamp*, they use the symbols of ‘mirror’ and ‘vamp’ to illustrate and illuminate “the intellectual assumptions and strategies of most contemporary feminist theorists” (Gilbert, 32). The mirror, for the feminist critics ‘becomes a space in which to capture the shifting historical images of gendered reality’ (34). What Gilbert and Gubar postulate about the feminist critic is largely true of the feminist author also. The feminist author belonging to the ‘mirror’ category, tries to rebuild the past, often questioning the misinterpreted and distorted cultural history. But he/she does not challenge the concepts of reality which underlie the very activities of periodization and evaluation under the patriarchal umbrella. To name a few feminist novelist that may be said to fall in this mirror category in the Indian English Fiction, one can easily recall the likes of Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and even Bharti Mukherjee, who have fearlessly probed into the question of the subaltern, subordination and liberation of woman in the Indian milieu.

The second category in which, Gilbert and Gubar place the more vocal and violent feminist critics is that of vamp. A vamp serves as a paradigm for the artist’s expressive autonomy as well as “...for rebelliously antirational and anti-hierarchical impulses that have been repressed but not erased by patriarchal culture” (145). The ‘vamp’ artist, like other feminist, also demand total liberation from the

male domination, a re-writing of female discourse and deconstruction of the binary opposites of culture/nature, man/woman, mind/body, day/night, reason/imagination etc, in their works. They hate, may dislike, the phallogentric standards of art, culture and history. The ‘mirror’ authors are definitely full of decorum and rationalism and do not believe in breaking down the aesthetic taboos in pell-mell fashion. To the contrary, “like a dark double, the vamp acts out the desire for the apocalyptic revolution against law and order that lurks on the other side of the mirror” (157). Shobha De’s striking affinity with the ‘vamp’ group of feminist authors with special reference to *Starry Nights*, places her amongst those radical writers who are against subalternity.

Shobha De’s women are ones who form a new and highly intriguing group- they are daring, educated, unconventional, shrewd, rich, and self-absorbing with loose morals. Shobha De is different from predecessors, as she makes it clear where she writes about herself and her books:

I was caught between the two- not quite here and not quite there. Perhaps because of the publicity I received, my books were regarded with suspicion and skepticism for being commercially successful. We were still clinging to the virtue of low-key⁶, underplayed, quite conformist writing in English that didn’t shake the status quo. Writers, who preceded me particularly women, were either erudite elderly ladies or fierce single woman with a strong message to deliver. I didn’t fit in. There was no clear slot for me. It was far easier to dismiss my books and concentrate on the publicity- which, when I think back, was phenomenal by those days’ standards, but modest by today’s (*Selective Memory*, 348).

Shobha De displays the first signs of being a vamp artist in *Socialite Evenings* in which the troika of female characters symbolizes the absolute freedom of womankind from all types of patriarchal restraints. In *Socialite Evening* Anjali is highly attractive and charming. Anjali throws off the conventional moral values by wayside as she seductively rises from her middle-class background to the upper-most rung of society. She enacts a marriage of convenience with Abe, “an experience rake with a wild reputation” (*Socialite Evenings*, 12). Both of them revel in the orgiastic rituals. Her passion for sex is illimitable indeed as the novel bristles with her frequent sexual encounters. Even Karuna discards the traditional role of a wife and fondly relishes the extra-marital relationship with Krish. Taking a lesson

from her mentor Anjali, Karuna brazenly adopts a militant attitude with her husband when he tries to prevent her from enjoying a week-long sexual orgy with Krish in Rome. Anjali, Karuna, and Ritu are the proverbial succubi who reign supreme in their world of limitless libido. *Starry Nights* is a blend of the mirror and the vamp approaches to feminism. All the events in the novels up to Aasha surrender to Kishanbhai fall in the mirror category and after that it is of vamp category.

The modern Indian woman, who is at the centre of fiction of Shobha De, is no longer a model of Vedic, or pre- Vedic dignified woman, nor is she modeled on the post-Aryan woman who is passive and subalternate in nature and accepts the dominance and superiority of men in society. De's women born in post-war generation, in an atmosphere of bewilderment and confusion, have become bold and capable of surviving in degrading moral values of life. These characters suffer a humiliation as far as their social, economic, and cultural life is concerned but they also find themselves capable of struggling, compromising, and realizing their existence in the end.

Shobha De has either been dismissed or, at best, discussed among literary circle as a female counterpart of Khushwant Singh. Shobha De, like D.H. Lawrence, is modern novelist who is famous for portraying the sexual mania of the commercial world in most of her works. But they cannot be easily termed as pornographic. Her women are strong enough to say a big 'no' to every unfair treatment meted out to them. In narration of incidents she is very frank and straight forward. She emphatically says that she is not a writer of sex alone. Sex is there in her novels and no one can deny it, but according to her, she is not like Khushwant Singh and condemns him for writing *The Company of Women*:

I may write something stronger in future. And no, I'll definitely not write *The Company of Woman*. It gives sex a bad name. My fantasies happen to be far more imaginative. Khushwant should never have written the book-sex, in Khushwant's case, has always been in his head and there it should have remained. I adore Vikram Seth. And I love reading Amy Tan, Kathy Lette, and new women writers with something original to say, like Helen Fielding of Bridget Jones' Diary (Bhattacharya, 1).

She does not welcome those beings who have no logical insight to understand the undercurrent of her writings especially novels. Shobha De's remarks about how *Socialite Evenings* originated, is also helpful in understanding her manner of writing. For instance, she points out that her *Socialite Evenings* is not Indianized version of *Beverley Hill* but an entirely accurate if merciless exposure of Bombay "high society" (*Selective Memory*, 330). That is why she used the kind of language and the explicit sex scenes that cause 'major shock waves' among readers when it was first published: "this was the first time that an Indian woman wrote in this manner, and it was difficult to accept' (331). Shobha De believes, obviously, that she was writing the truth as she saw it, in the only way it could be expressed, and not because it ensured quick sales and a glamorous notoriety with which, however, she is only too often an easily identified. She further says about her novels that one encounter to bring home the fact. I had always been gravitating towards women. I was a women's woman" (Sanghvi, 1).

Partly her own writings and to some extent media have projected Shobha De as a glamorous person who is a keen observer of upper-class life of cosmopolitan cities (particularly Mumbai) but lacks commitment to the social cause. This kind of public and literary image does not augur well for Shobha De, the person, either. Thus, we can say her novels are based on some real story, but presented through she could either "ruminate or write" (Bhattacharya, 1). In other words, we can say she is "a social commentator" (*Selective Memory*, 229).

But it does not mean that she is a revolutionary, as is clear from her words:

I'm only a newspaper hack. My printed opinions are hardly likely to change the world, topple governments, and make heads roll. A mention or two in my column may help some society lady sell a few more Salwar-Kameezes. It may let a few leaders of the paper know that such-and-such person exists and is doing interesting stuff or that I feel strongly about certain issues. (330)

The same thing she suggests in an interview: "Where people could not be reformed by the writings of revered saints and gurus, can my writing reform them?" (Shukla, 1) She further speaks about her writing style: "I am teller of stories. If there is a subliminal message in there, somewhere, readers are welcome to it. I do not see myself as a Nineties version of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in a sari" (Guha, 3).

Shobha De is perhaps the first woman writer to write about man-woman relationship with our inhibitions. Of Course there is Kamala Das who, through her poems and her *My Story* brought out the hypocrisy that pervades all human relationships. De differs from Das in the sense that De is more familiar with the darker side of the so called sophisticated section of society which parades as a decent crowd when there is sunshine. The sunset brings about a great transformation in social actions and cosmetics take over in bright lights or in more fashionable candle lights. Morality takes a backseat and people become shadows. De is familiar this world and she watches everything and writes beautifully about the women who have decided to refuse to continue with the conventional patterns of sexuality, subalternity and gender specific roles and attains sexual independence by moving against sexual subalternity.

Whatever Shobha De has portrayed, she has done it with a conviction that the readers may have a real feel of the life of people who are rich and powerful. In fact De's women are contemporary, urban; middle-class Indian ladies who are not out with a sole aim to over throw the establishment or the social system in order to grab power. They are a set of well-equipped women- filthy rich, well-educated, talented, and unbelievably ambitious. These women are calculative and use men as means to an end, the end being a fulfillment of their aim to become rich, famous, and independent, as her novel *Snapshots* has rearranged the equation of the power game wherein woman either controls power or is in a position to ignore the prescriptions of male authority. The drama of the novel has the backdrop of Bombay in the last decade of the present century. None of the critics have analyzed the novel in light of Shobha De's women struggles of attaining economic independence while moving against economic subalternity. Historically, thematically, economically and culturally *Snapshot* depicts woman against subalternity.

A very striking group of new modern women are emerging stealthily in Indian aristocratic society, which De presents in her novels with enthusiasm and creative energy. Her women in the novels show a continuation of similar behavioral traits of the new women. They are all daring women and have lots of stamina to face the stress and strain of the high society they live in. They are not afraid of facing

every brick thrown in their way in their way in their endeavor to lead lives on their own terms. Power, money, and fame are the three biggest aspirations of these women.

They are ready to take up every challenge which lies before them to get what they want. Nothing matters to them as long as they can enjoy life. They refuse to look on man as their superior. They are daring lioness on the prowl, out to attack everything that comes to hinder them from catching their prey. Mallika (Mikki) in *Sisters* is a woman who struggles against the constraints of being a woman and finally completes her odyssey of moving against economic subalternity. The novel set in the corrupt world of big business, appears to tell an interesting story of two wealthy and socialite women who, driven by ambition and lust, are involved in an unending rivalry and go through the ordeal of self-assertion.

Another example of the new dark and sinister image of modern women De daringly unravels in her novel *Socialite Evenings*. Here De views woman not only as meek, passive, and subaltern but as the embodiment of power also. In *Karuna* this power syndrome assumes a positive figure but in *Winnie* it is a negative force, the destructive image, the image of Kali. Let us have a look at what *Karuna*'s husband says about the bewitching *Winnie*: "She is a very strange and powerful woman. I feel ashamed to admit this, but I'm scared of her. I can't do anything because I know she will destroy me. She has that power" (*Socialite Evenings*, 264).

Shobha De has emerged on the literary scene of Indian fiction dealing with the vital aspects of existence and survival in high class society of India. Closely acquainted with the Bombay cinema and the world of modeling, she has beautifully mirrored the shattering human values of this glittering society. Her novels occupy themselves with the themes of over-powering materialism, lack of spirituality and the crumbling moral values in which a wretched and isolated women longs for pleasure and wants to fly freely in the sky of freedom. Her women characters represent a true picture of the modern Indian women.

Her novels dissect the metropolitan India with such clinical success that reveals all its inner characteristics. "It is a terrible insular world, not without its titillations, but ideologically stark and barren,

helplessly cocooned in the frenetic energy that wealth and social unconcern produce in the upper classes of India” (Verma, 4). In fact, in her writings, De exposes India’s rituals, customs, hypocrisy, sexual behavior, prejudices, corruption in politics and what not! However, she exudes great optimism at the same time. This honest spirit is clearly visible in her latest book, *Superstar India*,

I love what I see around me! I love the options and opportunities they beckon and I love the thought that if nothing goes wrong, I’ll be around to see our country rising like the sun, in all its majesty...seeing another golden era, this one even better and more glorious than the one of the Emperor Ashoka’s time, when Gupta’s dynasty ruled over vast swathes of the country and India resembled a lush garden in full bloom. Such a flowering is not beyond us even today, provided we don’t blow it (*Superstar India*, 24).

De’s writing focuses attention on both manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality and this awareness results in De’s woman movement against subalternity. Gender, like other categories such as race and class, has become abundantly clear, is a significant category of social and political reality. Shobha De’s novels delineate the awakening of woman’s consciousness which impels her to strive for moving against subalternity in an absurd and oppressive world. This awakened consciousness of woman stands for the human effort to be whole human being, regardless of difference in gender, caste, and religion.

The studies of Shobha De’s novels show the novelist’s perspective portrayal of the secret depths of human psyche. Like Anita Desai, she has the gift of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology. De’s accurate portrayal, saucy racy and charismatic style, and vivid descriptions compel the reader to identify him or herself with the character and situations.

The search for identity has been a popular theme in fiction. Many writers have portrayed the problem of the place of woman in society, her true belonging, and her place in marital relationship. But often the novels end where these problems begin; writers, no doubt, raise the problem without offering any solutions. Sometimes there is an escape from the misery of the world; sometimes they yield sorrows

of the world. Shobha De has very realistically presented the models before us. Her women, rather strong in character, take bold decisions to survive in society. Shobha De's novels trace the growth of the protagonist such as biography/autobiography sets out to do.

Thus, one finds conflicting critical opinions about the novels of Shobha De and on Shobha De herself, who is an Indian woman, and it's the greatest tragedy in the history that the Indian woman has no ground of her own to stand on and so critics are free to comment on her rationally or irrationally. By and large the critics do not rate her as a serious novelist. In case of Shobha De, some critics have crossed the limit of civic and logic, some remain within, but few are able to read the novelist's mind and reach near the reality. But *Selective Memory* has worked wonders in favor of Shobha De, the person as well as the writer. After reading this one is bound to shake off the image of the writer who could inhabit only the fringe of literary canvass. There also emerges the image of a person who is deeply conventional and devoted and tries to play every role assigned by life or circumstances to perfection, has immense capacity to judge people impersonally and possess a mischievous charm to disarm people even while appearing to be modest. One comes across a woman of tremendous grit who was prepared to fight her way out.

Selective Memory is written when the author turns fifty and coincidentally the country commemorates fifty years of independence. The story of Shobha De's life is the story of the New Woman of independent India. Her self-identification is described in the new ideology. Her combat against the fixed identity of the docile, tortured and conformist woman of pre-independence period turns out to be an individual protest as much as it is a product of influence of the new pace, the invasion of the western culture.

Shobha De, whose entire career is one of rebellion against patriarchy, from her choice of professions and her relationships to her language and her attempts to 'write the body', might accept the authority of authorship in her belief that she is in control of her matter and her medium but in *Selective Memory* her construction of her selfhood is subverted by the way she has "chosen to carve up [her] life

into those segments [she has] no reservations about revealing and serving up to readers” (*Selective Memory*, 527).

Shobha De has tasted the narcotic called fame by choosing to tread a less-peopled path way. Rebel is an open ended concept. Rebel is “one who resents and resists authority” (Geddie, 919). Independence of mind is the basis of a rebel. This is exactly what Shobha De has done throughout her life. De has given a full throated message in her novels that no man should underestimate women and that new woman is here to stay and man beware of the new reality. She visualizes that there will be a time when a woman’s voice will be universally heard and heeded. This is again evident when she says: “the quarrel is not who will scramble to the top of the human heap and stay there but with the race being run in fair terms and without weighted handicaps. Man will have to come to terms with women power. This is not the voice of naïve female optimism. It is the voice of reason and logic. I simply believe that another alternative just does not exist any longer” (*Shooting from the Hip*, 113).

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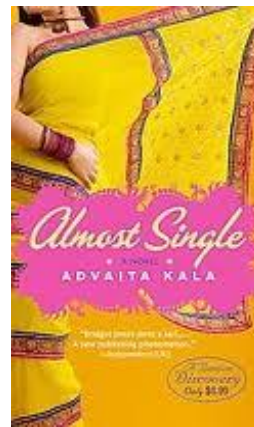
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Interpreted in a positive light De’s novels may be seen as her various artistic endeavors to give the message that these women though admirable and commendable yet need to keep a balance in their overly independent life-style and make life more purposeful. Their talents may not be spent merely in tracking down the rich and powerful man or spurning their gorgeous diamonds and rubies.

It is evident from this brief critical look at Shobha De's major works that her treatment of modern women in the field of sexual, economic and emotional and mind and art. The brief analysis of various strategies De's women characters adopt to cope with the pressures and challenges of life shows that De is a writer who depicts the universal struggle, through the specific example of her upper class women, for equality, freedom, justice and above all, for a life of wholeness and human dignity. A detailed in depth analysis of this theme appears to be necessary in order to arrive at a fair interpretation of her views of the world today as well as her vision of life. It can enable one to put in proper perspective the kind of upper-middle class world of women, she has chosen to depict with its intricacies, conflicts and struggles for domination and survival. A focus on this major concern of Shobha De can also help us to appreciate treatment of her art of characterization, her treatment of some of the more controversial issues and into her feministic cum humanistic approach to life if one examines her works with a special focus on the coping strategies of her characters. In fact, the workings of sexual, economic, emotional, social and psychological structures, and how they have an in built element of against subalternity, affecting lives of De's women in varying ways and with different consequences, appear to be very important for our understanding of the relevance of her art to society.

Let us extend the argument raised by Shobha De to women who are working and single as in the case of Advaita Kala's novel *Almost Single* which takes up the issues related with the hotel industry of today. The book is a racy rehash of the Bridget Jones' Diary, where the life of a twenty-nine year old career woman battling weight, wavering between self esteem and hangovers and woefully complicated love life, captures the imagination of the readers. She typifies the hyper active single woman in a big city who has to 'make it' in a man's world. She drinks, smokes, takes up challenging assignments is always on the verge of nervous breakdowns, and is a very conceivable stereotype of a guest relations manager in a five star hotel. Though almost irreverent of Indian womanhood, it is a reflection of the growing confidence of women

working in metropolitan cities. The very fact that they are away from home and in habit two worlds- the cosmopolitan city and the absolutely westernized ambience of a five star hotel- gives them a freedom that very few in India can think of. Their motto seems to be ‘to enjoy life is empowerment’.



... and glitterati of Chennai. Cream Centre has been popular in Mumbai for ... Indian glitterati rejoice! The Queen of Prints herself, ...



Glitz and glamour at the Sunday brunch

Like Pope's heroine Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, eleven o'clock is too early to get up after a particularly dense hangover. This is Aisha Bhatia, Guest Relations manager who's 'most nights these days are girl's nights out'. She is an avowed alcoholic. She simultaneously tolerates her job, hates her boss, annoys her X, bonds big time with friends Misha and Anushka and routinely suffers umbilical cord whiplash. As part of her work she meets the rich, the bold and the beautiful (ugly as well), dines at five star luxury hotels, stays in them during her travels, can name old and new world wines with élan. Though well paid, her salary gets sucked by her breezy lifestyle.

The novel begins with a typical Sunday hangover. Neither a hot shower nor two double espressos at the neighborhood *Barista* can wipe away her ennui. Another Sunday is wasted but Aisha is too tired to care. A pizza is ordered at six for the greasy desperate cravings and the evening goes by in tele surfing with of course the cigarettes to intervene. Aisha is a typical in job, young Delhiyte surrounded by the two friends who complete the picture of the urban female city dweller. Misha with her one point programmes of netting the perfect NRI and Anushka recently divorced and on a look out for a 'second sherwani' guy. Their body language, the vocabulary they use, the places they haunt are all indicative of the lifestyle of these young, embellished, care-for-nothing belles who indulge in crazy, juvenile, irresponsible, escapades without even a passing twang. It is at one of these that she meets Karan Verma who turns to be a special

guest of her demanding boss who warns her, “don’t get into your bitchy spinster mode. He’s paying 350 dollars a night. I want no complaints” (AS, 33). One of the errands that Mr. Verma assigns her is a list of people whom he wants flower and perfumes delivered to as gifts in the next three months. And the next three months is what it takes the novel to wind up and Aisha to realize that it’s Karan who will ultimately deliver her from the drab monotony of her almost single life. Despite her job, her own lifestyle, friends and an identity, Aisha is still the Indian woman inside and still concern about the other woman in his life. Karan of course waves away every petty offense and acknowledges that although he doesn’t understand her, he loves her anyway.

What we see behind this very frivolous, at times irreverently wicked novel is an insight into the strange pressures that women encounter as professionals in the show biz industry, the adjustments that they have to make to protect themselves from unwanted and unsolicited attention. Also just below the scratching surface is the whole hostile environment of sexual harassment at the work place, where a woman employee is exposed to unwanted sexual advances from colleagues or superiors. The likes of Aisha have to learn to ward off these with as they are capable of. If they do not keep their cool and their distance just about anything can happen to topple the apple cart. Moreover, the not so thinking bosses would have an aversion to women employees if they did not help him upward mobility even if it meant a downward plunge in the latter’s morality, the new spaces that women have entered into like Aisha’s guest relations officer, calls for a reinvention of womanhood, the makeover into an articulate, glamorous being is not without a price to be paid. What if Karan had not been the responsible, understanding type- would not Aisha the almost single turned into an always single spinster dissatisfied and cynical about life? What if Karan had let that one binding towel cloth of fall before the nuptial knot was tied? These and other questions plague one’s conscience despite the breezy roller coaster that *Advaita Kala* takes us on.

We see that Aisha has no inhibitions- she lives as she likes, spends as she likes and is answerable to none about her way of life. This freedom and ensuing power she derives from her economic independence. We can see that employment in a socially productive work system has given Aisha a freer

hand; she can dictate life at her own terms and is not forced to tolerate subjugation that is otherwise the lot of a vast majority who do not have the same chances as she has despite the fact that Aisha has in a way abused her recourse to more self-esteem and self worth. The very fact that she is fending for herself, is neither helpless nor dependent, makes her overcome the meekness that leads to subordination and the passivity that makes one suffer violence. She has access to affording all that she wishes for which other women merely yearn after. Her economic independence has also given her the right to dictate her terms even as far as choosing a life partner is concerned. She can now actualize her fancies and the one wish to get NRI husband too she can fulfill.

The case that Advaita Kala's novel *Almost Single* makes though indirectly is that a good, profession oriented education is a key to a better life. The social, political, filial and even biological wrongs done to women which the women accepted and tolerated quietly not because they were not gritty or defiant, but because, being ignorant, illiterate and uneducated they had not been able to recognize these as wrongs at all. A woman can recognize her own worth, can identify her need to be an individual in her own right, and assert herself in her own independent capacity only when she is educated. Education is the weapon she can use to fight the war of inequality between the illiterate and the educated. Education is the ornament that beautifies a woman forever and knows no barrier of age, race, class, or status. Education is the ticket that allows a woman to proceed on the journey towards economic independence. Education helps in raising the status of women in four ways. Education helps a woman to (1) earn an income in later life; (2) participate actively in public life; (3) determine her own fertility; and (4) achieve personal autonomy. The educated woman has both the choice and the bargaining power in getting a job and salary, unlike her uneducated sister. She can also exercise a choice about the location of the job in the sense that she may or may not choose to go out of the home in order to get productive work. The fact remains that the higher the level of education attained by a woman, the more likely is she to enter and remain in employment for a longer period.

Another significant point made by the novel is that a working woman has to mould herself to the need of the times; she has to accept the dictates that her profession makes. Whether it is one way one dresses, the company one keeps, the time schedule that has to be punctually adhere to, these are sacrifices against a total freedom. But the saving grace is that it is not only she as a woman who has to bow down, but her male counterparts have to do the same. It is this awareness of not being singled out that makes the dictatorial axe more acceptable. There is also the realization that if one is asked to do more it is because she is considered more proficient and competent and this increases self worth. Here it is not a question of a woman being over burdened but it is a matter of efficacy which makes over work and overtime more pleasurable. Aisha gains a sense of superiority when her employers ask her to do that which others might be incapable of.

Undoubtedly there is a woman deep down within her that makes her yearn for 'girlish' pleasures. The tall, dark handsome man from abroad who will lift off her feet and take pride in her love is even her dream which she can now see coming true. This is unlikely in the case of vast majority of women in India who are tied down in an arranged marriage and have to live a life crushing their childhood fantasies. In the case of Aisha, there seems to be no threat of an overpowering marriage, she can walk out of the relationship if it doesn't suit her or turns sour. This privilege is denied to those who do not have an alternative to fall back upon. Although as time passes by she knows that she will have to take a decision. At the very thought of her buddies getting hooked up there is an onset mind of anxiety which is abetted by her mother and in a threatened moment she calls up her astrologer

'Shastriji, *namaste aap kaise hain?*'

'I am fine. I need to ask you something.' I state the obvious.

'*Haan, bolo?*'

'Do you see marriage in my future?'

'Well, your stars are changing. Lagna yog starts on the twenty first of this month. This time is auspicious for marital alliances.' Shastriji is a computer whiz; he has it all on his PC.

‘So, do you see me getting married soon?’ I ask, getting straight to the point.

‘Ummm... the time is auspicious... so let’s see... there are indications.’

Shastriji is also the Artful Dodger; he never commits to anything. I think that’s what keeps me going back. I can never say for certain that he was wrong about something.

There are always ‘indications’(AS, 13).

She also knows that age will bring down her market value and for her this how it works

You start out being called *baby* and then the respectful *didi*, then comes the biggest and most traumatic transition, from *didi* to the dreaded *aunty*; and finally, the truly god-awful *mataji*. But in today’s botoxed world, if you get to the *mataji* stage, you probably don’t care anyway. I’ve been called *aunty* on some rare occasions, but mostly *didi*, so I figure I’m still good to go (AS, 11).

So marriage is perhaps always at the back of their minds and to catch the most eligible bachelor, a decided pursuit. Besides, it would be the best way to ward off the naughty glances of the boss. She knows that he is a philanderer but her career is precariously placed and she has no intentions of getting embroiled. She is also aware that it is the other women who are the powerful mafia in the hotel biz.

The *grandes dames* are seated in order of importance: Rosie, the owner’s secretary, twenty-six years at the hotel; Jayanti, the GM’s secretary, eighteen years in the hotel biz; Madhu, secretary of the Director of Sales, with twelve years of experience; and finally Sarla, who has been working for the Director of Human Resources for fourteen years. I bow my head deferentially and flash them my most obsequious smile (AS, 30).

But these working girls have learnt to take care of themselves. Aisha’s friend Misha is an insurance advisor who comes from a well-to-do family from Bhatinda. She works as and when she has a client or when her liaison officer at the insurance company pleads with her. Bade Papaji got her the job and she doesn’t want any negative feedback finding its way to Bhatinda. It would mean a Skoda ride home via Chandigarh. For Misha, this job in Delhi means a release from the shackles of small-town

living and gidda soirees, and not the money or career prospects it offers. She has no fixed routine as she picks her clients more often than they choose her. Besides, her parents are happier with her away. They don't have to keep explaining why their kudi is still not married. Misha herself is circumspect about her roots. The big city has tutored her well, and she always answers any question about where she grew up with a breezy 'up north'.

These girls also fantasise and romanticise about marriage and are aware that those already married have a different perception:

What is it about single women in our age group? The day they find a man, they totally disconnect from the rest. Their single girlfriends become a burden, reminders of just how close they came to missing the boat. Suddenly, the single girl community is perceived as a group of hungry piranhas, waiting to sink their teeth into any man, even the unavaible variety. The soon-to-be-married species starts to take refuge in married friends, like they understand the nuances of relationships as opposed to the single gals (AS, 117).

So *Almost Single* is a treatise upon knowing what it is to be single, wanting to be married, and yet being afraid to take the plunge. And this is the story that Advaita Kala weaves. Thus, chick lit is not about just any and every upper middle class women but about those women who have worked hard to be able to take the reins of their lives in their own hands. No doubt some of Shobha De's women are those who are born with a silver spoon or those upon whom fate has been munificent, but the likes of Aisha are those who have worked their way up. In their case, the chances of staying up are more. And this is true of the professional career women of modern India; they are the *Maitreyis* and *Gargis*, no *Draupadis* or *Sitas*. No husband of theirs can barter their self worth or renounce them to isolation. Aisha cares not what others would say to her boozing out on the weekends, getting up late on weekends and pampering herself with McDonald food and chocolates as long as she is out there on Monday morning to grace her position as esteemed hotel employee. Gone are the days when women were loathe to enter such jobs today they are coveted and come after one has spent long years in a challenged atmosphere working for them. No job is now mean or disrespectful. One look at what women have achieved in various spheres is enough evidence

that they are taking the world by a storm and not being stormed out by adverse assessments. This rings out loud in *Almost Single* when Lata Didi, the so-called happily married blurts out about the other half of women scape:

Every night is a battle. But what do I do? It's been ten years now and I'm only a college graduate. Where can I go? Papa has also retired. Aisha, it's good you're waited. You have a job, a life, friends, an identity...(AS, 276).

Getting back to the polemics that Simon-de-Beauvoir floated with *The Second Sex* (1949) about women not being biologically but socially the other, chick lit dwells largely on the extremes of otherness that educated, urban young women can fall a prey to. In order to profess difference gendered entities like Aisha, Misha and Anushka flaunt their sexuality which becomes the hallmark of women in 'show' spaces. They affirm to the notions projected by the French feminists regarding sex and sexuality, the cultural agenda of radical feminism.

If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.

-Margaret Fuller.