

**‘BOLDNESS’ AND ‘FLAUNTINGNESS’ AS THE COMMON ELEMENTS
IN THE WRITINGS OF SHOBHAA DE: WITH A SPECIAL REFERENCE
OF HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY ‘SELECTIVE MEMORY’**

MAYUR R. AGRAVAT¹, M.A., B.Ed, M.Phil

Shri Chimanbhai Patel Institute of
Business Administration
Ahmedabad, INDIA
mayur.agravat86@gmail.com

RITA DABHI², M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.

L. J. Polytechnic, Sanand Circle,
Ahmedabad, INDIA

ABSTRACT:

Shobhaa De’s writing talks about the women’s rights and their societal status. The issue here is just to see her autobiography with the perspective of women, and that too in India, where women are still not allowed to flourish and flower. They are still behind the veil of shame, shame of being born as a woman. In such a country, if a woman comes out and speaks her mind, then it creates havoc in the social order, and it had created havoc in past. There are many instances where Indian women had tried to come out of the veil of shame, and had tried to listen to their hearts, but in their respective ages they were contempt for not following the rules, rules that were laid by the so called ‘male’ of the society for their own selfish ends. There if a woman bravely expresses her mind then one can imagine the uproar it can create, may it be through the journalism, literature, or just speaking for the womanly rights, she is always noticed. Shobhaa De though being a woman, writes novels which too centers around the psychology of women’s sexuality or it would be appropriate to call it the psychology of the ‘modern’ women’s sexuality. Her writing necessarily presents the overwhelming spirit of women desire.

Key Words: boldness, flauntingness, shame

It is said that those who rule the world rule the world and since men historically dominated the role of the author’s, therefore, a deep rooted gender bias became

a part of our historical and textual tradition. The significance of the immense potential of women would have remained confined to the margins had the world not produced reformers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, J. S. Mill, Simone de Beauvoir, and the likes of them, whose persistent efforts gradually shifted the emphasis from the Andro-text to Gyno-texts. Consequently feminist consciousness emerged as the new spirit of the age. No doubt, in the beginning it was an individual trend but it has global relevance now and, in most cases its coming out of a genuine desire to make a difference. Indian women novelist too have concentrated on women's problem in their works and are expressing themselves freely and boldly and that too on a variety of themes from a feminine eye, without adopting feminist posture. What was just a beginning in writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam has assumed a strident posture in Shobhaa De and others.

Shobhaa De and Her Field

Shobhaa De, one of India's best-selling authors, often compared or known as India's Jackie Collins, was born as Shobhaa Rajadhyaksha to the Saraswat Brahmin family of Maharashtra on January 7, 1947. Completing her graduation in psychology from St. Xavier's college Mumbai, she opted for modeling, journalism and now penning books, she reinvented the concept of fashion and celebrity hood, as the editor of '*Celebrity*' the magazine at the age of twenty three, now a days she writes three columns a week and soon going to be four, plus an article and a T. V. Script, she is interviewed every other day by T. V. channels and print journalists from all over the world, which has made her the most interviewed Indian in the universe, she is mother to a large family of children-hers, his and theirs and in the middle of all this, she writes a book a year. Actually makes that happen once every nine months.

These days she is staying with her second husband Dilip De along with their children, and is working as a columnist and writes for a fortnight magazine '*The Week*'. In this periodical she writes on varied issues concerning the society. She speaks her mind in her writings. Many a times she has been held responsible for accelerating the pace and bringing about a sexual revolution through her writings in the columns '*The Sexes*' of the magazine '*The Week*.' This shows that she is one of the hardest working writers on the subcontinent.

When she wrote Novels about rich House wives, bored with their loveless marriages, she shocked the readers and writers alike, who were used to subtleness of the women depicted in Indian Novels, since then there has been no stopping Shobhaa De. She describes her journey from being a middle class girl

with a lot of aspiration in life to best-selling author as 'exciting'. The lady, who has depicted women as epitomes of power, liberty and beauty in her books, says,

"There should be no word like 'Compromise' in the dictionary of women."

(headlinesindia.com)

Her various books with Penguin India-the novels, (*Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sultry Days, Sisters, Strange Obsessions, Snapshots and Second Thoughts*), three books of the non-fiction (*Surviving Men, Speed post and Spouse*) and an autobiography (*Selective Memory*) all highlight her attempts to find ways by which women can survive and cope in a world that is cruel to them. She clarifies that her brand of feminism is not about women getting up and fighting for their rights, but is more sly and subversive. The author, whom critics love to hate, has always has penchant for writing steamy books, her feminist side coming to the fore, as the female protagonists in her books love to flaunt their dark, sensuous sides and are a far cry from the female image that the male dominated country wants to see in the society.

The erotic content of her novels has been somewhat controversial. De makes her female characters break sexual taboos and put forth candidly what they always felt, but were too afraid and inhibited to show. Conversely she realizes that this aspect of female sexuality is still hurtful to men, as it could mean women talking about being bored with their husbands, sexually, mentally and spiritually.

"The very fact that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three letter word in India is enough reason to celebrate."

She says with unfeigned glee, and recommends a mature attitude to sex, wherein it should be something special, something shared, something beautiful. Love is a major motivating factor for women in all her novels, though it takes various forms: sometimes aggressive and destructive (like in '*Strange Obsessions*', which has lesbianism as its theme) and at other times submissive, innocent and childlike (Maya in '*Second Thoughts*'). Her fiction often focuses on an exhausted generation of neglected wives, who yearns for companionship and appreciation which invariably eludes them. Interestingly, it's not just bored and frustrated housewives, but also hardened cynical women who are vulnerable to the eternal feminine fantasy of a partner for whom she would mean the world. Most of the times however, De highlights the futility of this emotional surrender because of a man's innate inability to reciprocate it.

Thus, the archetypal Indian male in Shobhaa De's novels has been painted in the darkest colours. She obviously believes that Indian women have changed qualitatively, and are a part of the modern world and ready for the new millennium, but the Indian male is still trapped by history and refusing to be taken out of this torpor. This imbalance deals a major blow to the institution of marriage. Hitherto, it had provided for the society's need for love, security and children, but in the fictional world of Shobhaa De, it is not regarded as essential as in *'Shooting from The Hip'*, De writes,

"The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a lifelong meal-ticket."

However, her non-fictional work *'Spouse-The Truth about Marriage'* debunks the image that most Indians have of Shobhaa De, a man-hating feminist. In it, she wholeheartedly endorses marriages and says emphatically,

"Don't knock it till you have tried it."

Simultaneously Shobhaa De goes on to emphasize that eventually every man woman relationship is a power struggle, either on an overt or subliminal level. Very often we find De exploring the difficulties that women face in balancing career and marriage in a male-dominated society, thus highlighting the economic aspect of this power play. Her Novels emphasize the value of equivalence of power. The ending of *'Starry Nights'* brings out De's emphatic statement.

"The women in my books are definitely not doormats. They are not willing to be kicked around."

Her autobiography *'Selective Memory: Stories from My Life'* hit the book stores. In it, she rails against the Jackie Collin's label, *'Selective Memory'* gives the rest of her defense, after reading the autobiography of intensely personal details, a reader marvels at the contrast between the ethereal beauty on the book's cover and the woman described within : work-driven, self critical, wickedly funny, and undeniably lucky.

After reading all from De one feels that, it's not everything that's worth reading but her treatment of the contemporary urban woman's challenges, predicaments, values and life style are surely not without significance. Through her novels and essays, she has tried to shatter patriarchal hegemony, by vociferously drawing

attention to women's exploitation, discrimination and commoditization in the Indian ethos. She is as direct in her speech as she is in her works. She says,

"If the contents of my books have shocked India, well, they did. I don't want to explain, complain and certainly never apologize".

Indian cotemporary writing owes a depth of substance to this enterprising lady, who has taken off from the literary launch pad and is soaring comfortably in the world of serious readers.

***'Selective Memory - Stories from my Life'*-Shobhaa De**

Shobhaa De, born and brought up in a narrow minded, middle class family, has surfed through many waves of life. From a rebellious teenager to a modish model and a frustrated copywriter, uprooting to the editorship of stardust and to today, a glittering socialite and perhaps India's best known and most criticized writer.

She has released her autobiography in 1998, at the age of fifty, before that she has raveled as a model, journalist, editor, novelist, columnist and a T.V. soap writer, her recent work *'Superstar India: From Incredible to Unstoppable'*, is a gift to her readers, as India and Shobhaa De both turns sixty, wherein, she has chronicled change, which has affected India and her life too.

'Selective Memory - Stories from my Life' is her eleventh work, an autobiography, since 1989. It seems selected from the columns she has written over the years, but the resemblance goes only as far as the early conversational style of writing, for the book is the story of how Mumbai created the celebrity writer, she has once said,

"We feasted on each other, Bombay and I.

I am a byproduct of this city."

'Selective Memory' is not a complete tell-all account of her life. It is a book, a thirty year culling together of society, soirees and selected scandals. Like always, De has not been polite in print about what she thought was unacceptable. The book also recreates 70s humorously and honestly, as that was the time when the city became truly cosmopolitan.

'Selective Memory' is a simply written account of a very eventful life. But when she was asked that, *"Why did a writer who is known for her*

forthrightness choose to be 'selective' when it came to herself?" she responded,

"I don't have to tell everything. It is not obligatory for a writer to do the full monty in public."

Indian Express News Paper (Bombay)Annu Kumar

In 1998, when '*Selective Memory*' was published, it was not only displayed in the most prominent place in each book shops but dozens of copies were on show, vertically the better to exhibit Gautam Rajadhyaksha's glamorous portrait of her.

Discreet, open, honest, vulnerable but far removed, these are some of the adjectives which floats into one's mind when one reads her '*Selective Memory*'. This is a work where someone is putting some of her life in public domain and doing it honestly, sometimes movingly.

It is a very long, running into 531 pages account of her life, in a good quarter of it, De talking of her '*Stardust*' days, experiences and peccadilloes of film stars and their hangers on. People close to her and whoever has gone through her engagingly candid memoir, knows that despite her commitments to work and frantic pace of life, Shobhaa De's first priority has always been her family. '*Selective Memory*' is a story where she writes poignantly of her early years and of her relationships with her parents siblings, husband and children. Her high voltage career '*happened*' in an unexpected way, starting with her unplanned entry as a teenager into a glamorous world of Modeling, and moving on to her high-profile years as a magazine editor, columnist, social commentator, a T.V. script writer and now a novelist.

In all these roles she has keenly observed and astutely chronicled the new India - brash, affluent and ambitious. High society, high jinks, movie-star follies, and celebrity neuroses - none of these escaped her unsparing eye, and now she tells it all, just as it was, just as she saw it. In her inimitably forthright fashion, she writes of the choices she made, the decisions she took, and the influences that shaped her.

Written in a voice that is consistently confident and candid, '*Selective Memory - Stories from my Life*' is remarkable for the honesty with which it captures the essence of a fascinating woman, who has become a legend in her own time. In '*Selective Memory*' she rails against the '*Jackie Collins*' label, she mentions it in her autobiography too that,

“I’ve tried joking, but that’s how it works with the foreign correspondents - once an image is set by the leader of the pack, it sticks, and no amount of aggressive denial can get rid of it.”

The memoir is an aggressive attempt to distance herself from *Jackie Collins, Joan, Barbara, Taylor Bradford* and other authoresses, for whom glamour is a sales tool. If one reads the memoir then a surface overview divides it into two clear parts, first is the beginning, where she talks about her childhood days till her modeling career and a period with Stardust. Wherein she tells us of her birth, being a girl child, she had disappointed her mother and grand-mother because, her mother prayed for the second son, only her father was happy and declared her ‘lucky’ for the family, as major changes, as for instance her father got a job in Delhi, for which he had applied, only after her birth. She talks about her siblings, and their schooling. Major part of the autobiography is filled with the descriptions of the cities where she has spent memorable years of her life. If she is in Delhi, then she talks of ‘Khan Market’, ‘Man Nagar’ etc. she says she was the only child in her family, to make maximum demands on her parents, whose birthdays were celebrated, and being the youngest daughter, she was a spoiled child. When her father was transferred to Mumbai - her native, she gives an account of her experiences at her school, her fashion addictions, her transformation from a child to a teenager etc. She says,

“Compared to them, I grew up fast, very fast.”

As they shared the same room, it was she who introduced her elder sisters to pop-music, smoking, beer drinking, western dancing trendy hair styles, waxing hair, high heels, mascara, Hollywood magazines, racy books etc. She emerged as a national athlete in running, which was the only thing where she was allowed to flourish, but at the same time she is completely indifferent to the victories she had achieved at that age and turns blank about those victorious moments, without any kind of nostalgia. After her graduation in Psychology and Sociology, her father wanted her to get through the Civil Service Examinations, but her luck was turning her to some other direction. These days when she is asked, “*Whether she was a rebel*”, she answers,

“May be I didn’t conform to norms laid down by those in authority. But I was not a rude difficult child. Not especially. I did not set out to break rules or shock anybody; I did what came naturally to me without worrying too much about the consequences.”

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Her siblings were in sharp contrast to her, they were the trophy students in schools and colleges and unlike De they pursued worthy jobs. De was a well read and well informed student at the college. Her college life in Bombay, with Xavier's led her to modeling, which was completely out of her parent's knowledge and consent, then she goes on talking about other models and their attitude, totally in contrast to her tom boyish personality and without forgetting to mention the modeling equipments in those days, which displays her sense of humor, she laughs at herself, especially on her looks, and suddenly after spending five years in the profession, she opted for copywriting, that too was an accident, her senior at Xavier's was to be on her pregnancy leave and Shobhaa got to work in her place at the Creative Unit. She describes the place and incident exactly in the manner it had happened and out of nowhere her friend asked her, "Can you write?", "of course" was the answer, but it was something else than what she thought she was to write, later instead of quitting, she thought she should try, description is again lively and effective, and it was 'bye' to modeling. Nari Hira, her boss was arrogant and rude but she still stayed on, perhaps because this profession was accepted by her parents as compared to the modeling. After spending time with the Creative Unit, she thought of leaving it too and expressed her mind to the boss, but luck was offering her 'Stardust'-magazine writing, that was her solo venture. Although she knew nothing of the magazine writing and Bollywood, whom she's to write about, but she did it enthusiastically, just because, at *Stardust* she was on her own, no Nari Hira was breathing down her nose.

It was this phase of her life, where she got to meet the stars, film stars. She describes her encounters and impressions of celebrities. *Amitabh Bachchan* - pokes fun at his attempt to appear graceful, *V.S. Naipaul* - writes of his vanity and narcissism, *M. F. Hussain* - praise galore, *Rekha* - over weight, loud, giggly, and ridiculously dressed, when she first met Shobhaa De, *Shatrughna Sinha* - loud mouth, *Kabir Bedi* - self absorbed but transparent, *Zeenat* - glamorous, confident, bright and many more, the list of people she describes is endless. Nari Hira at that time was abroad and monitored development from there only. She herself also got a chance to go abroad for the first time, it was a bonus from Nari Hira, an international air ticket to New York, the chapter is filled with funny but effective incidents, but she chooses to keep it intact to herself only and doesn't wish tell it to anyone, as if it was her sole possession.

Almost everyone from the celebrity world is counted and commented in her autobiography, there are Bollywood couples like, *Hemamalini* - *Dharmendra*, *Rajesh Khanna* - *Dimple Kapadia*, *Raj Babbar* - *Smita Patil*, *Aamir Khan* -

Reena, Saif ali Khan - Amrita Singh, Kamala Hasan - Sarika, M. F. Hussain - Rushda, his muse, who is present in all his paintings, *Kajol* and *Shahrukh* are bitterly criticized for their casual behavior at an award function, whereas *Aishwarya Rai* is praised for her royal behavior as compared to her rival *Susmita Sen*. Shobhaa De goes on describing each and every person from Bollywood, so what if she just had a single dinner with the star! There are many such descriptions which mars the interest of the readers, because the gossip goes on for not less than two chapters of her autobiography, and still she calls it, '*selective memory*'. These are the chapters, which makes readers ponder that, "*ok, it's good that you met all these stars, but what about you?*"

Then as if just to relieve the readers from the boredom, she started a new magazine called '*Society*', it was a bit different from '*Stardust*', it was to gossip about celebrities of all the fields, not just film stars, here too the list of the people she criticized goes on to meet no end. It was '*Celebrity*', the magazine writing on celebrities, from where the second phase of her life and autobiography began, which brought her misfortune, things collapsed, and led her to divorce from her first marriage with *Mr. Khilachand*. '*Celebrity*' was sold to meet the debts. The next issue in her autobiography is the '*In*' and '*Out*' of celebrity hood. She says,

"The fact that a face appears more than five times in a publication or on Television is a sufficient qualification to dub him or her a 'Celebrity'."

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People approach her to be famous, with a clear line that, "*I want people to recognize me.*" People asked her for formula, key, method to success. Actually there is none. Celebrity hood brings with it a fright of old age, she talks of the pain, old age gives to these so called Celebrities, she mentions a few who are quite ok with the reality of wrinkles. Then leaving '*Celebrity*', she ventures in column writing, with '*Onlooker*' a political magazine. Then it was with '*Sunday Times*', she wrote on television, food, movies, people, events, fashion, trends, political happenings, everything which reflected her outlook, and created debate. It all ended when David Devidar approached her for a book for his publishing house, Penguin India, exactly when she was expecting Anandita, thus '*Socialite Evenings*' happened. It was created through the scribbles she made in hurry and got a new image of a writer, then followed '*Starry Nights*', '*Strange Obsessions*', '*Snapshots*', '*Second Thoughts*' etc.

Suddenly, Amit Khanna called her for a script writing, he was Mahesh Bhatt's partner and was in need of a script for then introduced T. V. soap '*Swabhimaan*', she accepted it without a second thought because, novels were not happening and she needed a break. It was such a big hit that, now most of the people know her for '*Swabhimaan*' only, not as a writer, journalist, model or by any other professions, she has ventured in.

It's her family, siblings, husband and children that are on the top of her priorities, and it is also true that very small place is given to them in her autobiography. It is very rare that she gets personal and talks openly of these most important aspects of her life. Her father and she herself wished for a king size life just like Sunita, her aristocratic friend, whose priorities were her hair dresser, her new blouse, or knitting etc. but on the other hand she liked to live as a workaholic woman, her family is her biggest critic, they criticize her looks, work and everything, and she feels grateful to them for their being honest.

She admits that, she is not in need of friends, as she had a huge family and now her children and husband also forms a big picture together. She mentions her times when they couldn't think of getting friends with her parents, but considers herself fortunate that her children don't hesitate to discuss anything under the sun with her. Being a psychology student, she understands each relationship, for instance, as being a mother to her daughters, she talks of the sweet mother - daughter relationship and its consequence in the modern times. Once again she comes to the divorce and talks of the reason behind it and her husband Sudhir's second wife Smita.

Now and then she compares herself with her mother and as a result her mother emerges as a very simple lady, whose world is her family, children and home, whereas for her it is Bollywood, T.V. script, novels, journalism and off course her family and everything in which she has ever ventured. Being a mother she has to perform best at all levels. In her father's family it was her father who played the '*father*' role. Her mother has always played a loving '*mother*' role and always approved of her rebellious behavior. Her father was a very honest man and a fair judge, temptation touched him just once, when he altered horoscopes, just to marry her mother, the incident is very effectively described by De.

It reaches to the height of emotions, and effectiveness when she narrates the account of her mother's ill health, which led to her death. The incident of '*Delhi Darbaar Chicken*' is truly poignant, her description of her father's condition as

a widower, and her ill manners with her mother, when she was alive, makes the readers cry with sympathy. This is the chapter where she expresses her guilt and pain. De was holidaying with her family, and her other siblings were also busy with their own lives; no one was there except her father when her mother died.

It's only towards the extreme end of her autobiography that she mentions her divorce, second marriage and children. It's all about how she met Dilip De and the coping up of children with new family and new environment. The chronology of her personal life, or the lack of it, is somewhat confusing, her being Mrs. Khilachand just slips in, it's when she mentions her children in the early chapters, that one gets to know that she is married and now a mother. Even the photographs given in the middle of the book does not contain any image of her first husband, Mr. Khilachand, at that moment it seems that Shobhaa De has become a bit partial, or it's evident that she is happy with her recent family and does not want to look back. She notes that no amount of love and affection can compete to the inherited genes of Rana and Radhika - her step children, and accepts them the way they are. It is somewhat strange that she talks of her first pregnancy in the last chapter, but her readers somehow manage to join these patches and form a picture of their author's life.

Her absolute love for her six children is heartwarming, they act as her censor board, who doesn't ever hesitate to give their views, though sometimes cruel but De has mellowed, many things that used to make her react harshly, and things that no longer seems to matter as much, nor does she pretend, that she doesn't like the money, the adulation, the celebrity life style, that she still works so hard to achieve and maintain.

'*Selective Memory*', makes the readers marvel at the contrast between the ethereal beauty on the book's cover and woman described within. An ordinary girl pitched into strange and often unpleasant celebrity hood. She has always been ahead of her times, wrote candidly and scrupulously of her dislikes and painstakingly sketched some very interesting experiences. It's her observations of diverse people and issues that hold the book together.

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