

# Search for Selfhood in Shobhaa De's Starry Nights

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## Abstract

Shobhaa De' continues to be one of the most popular Indian writers of the twenty-first century. She mainly focuses upon the vital aspects of existence and survival in high-class Indian society. 'Search for selfhood', 'split identity,'lust for money and power', 'lack of ethics' are some of the major themes of her novels. De' is a realist in the sense that her women characters represent a true and accurate picture of the high society of contemporary India, especially the modern Indian woman. Closely acquainted with the world of modelling and Bollywood cinema, she beautifully mirrors the decaying moral values of this otherwise glittering and glorifying society. In her autobiography, commenting on the novel, Shobhaa De wrote: "I had watched the film industry closely for a decade....While writing a fictitious account of Bollywood, I was able to harness all those inputs to create the characters....It was a dirty business I was dealing with, and I had no desire to sanitize it. The language employed was harsh, crude and explicit. It was the only way I knew to capture the underlying tragedy of Aasha Rani, to underline the depth of degradation she is subjected to, to better define the extent of exploitation that dominates this world of sham and make-believe.(De', Selective Memory 331)

**Keywords** : Bollywood, Female, Fascinating, Identity, Selfhood, Society, Woman.

### Introduction

Shobhaa De' started her career as a journalist in 1970 and emerged on the literary scene in 1988 with her first novel, the best selling 'Socialite Evenings'. She has written around twenty fiction and non-fiction books hitherto, and all of them have proved to be the best sellers in India and abroad. Her novels are prescribed in syllabi in some national and foreign universities also; this suggests that it is wrong to indict her and discard her away as a mere pulp fiction writer. Shobhaa De's novels indicate the emergence of a new woman eager to revolt against the patriarchal social system's traditional moral code of conduct. A comprehensive appraisal of De's novels elucidates her protest against the established image of women as an auxiliary. The women depicted in her novels are more prevailing than men. They are self-reliant and free-thinking and sexually liberated. Shobhaa De' is best known for her depiction of socialites and sex in her works of fiction, for which she has been referred to as the "Jackie Collins of India." [en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

### Review of Literature

There have been many articles and research papers written in newspapers, magazines and journals on Shobhaa De's writings. Unfortunately, very few consider her a serious writer; most of them rate her as a pulp fiction writer. They find her novels trash and hence not worthy of any serious literary attention. However, a few papers, particularly written on her most popular novel, *Starry Nights*, are mentioned here.

V. Kumar's article, 'Concept of New Woman in the Novels of Shobhaa De' (2019), throws light on various perceptions of women's emancipation and freedom. De' depicts, he rightly observes such women characters who break the traditional and moral values in society and are ready to smash their traditional image.

Dr Mrs Sheela Rani Khare's paper, 'Facets of Feminism in Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights*', focuses upon the bitter realities of women's lives through varied facets of feminism in keeping with contemporary feminist critical theories. Besides, Dr Khare emphasized the role of women in the suffering of women in one capacity or the other.

Dr Patil's 'The Novels of Shobhaa De': A Feminist Study' attempts to project Shobhaa De' as a feminist who fights for women's equality in a dogmatic patriarchal Indian society. De' focuses on women's struggle for recognition and survival and realises that the time has come when they should stop suffering



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silently in helplessness.

In his research article, 'Bed as Battlefield: A Study of Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights*', Dr Kanadeviews that Shobhaa De's novels are the documents of sex, and the negation of it may have disastrous results. However, De' gives her attention to women's issues in her novel, giving them a new approach.

#### **Aim of the Study**

In the present paper, I propose to focus on re-searching the female self with special reference to the heroine of the novel, *Starry Nights*. This paper attempts to show how through her revolutionary themes Shobhaa De' delves down into the psyche of her heroines and how her women characters refuse to be dummies in the hands of their husbands or live-in partners. Her heroines are not portrayed as string puppets, fragile, destitute, marginalised and helpless beings. She is frank in her narration of incidents. Her manner of depicting women's issues in her novels is pretty unusual, challenging and unconventional.

There is no denying the fact that Indian Women Novelists in English have made their permanent mark in the field of English fiction. These women novelists have been trying their best to liberate 'the woman' from the male-dominated society's shackles since the post-independence times, and they have, indeed, succeeded in their attempts to a large extent. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to say that whatever political, social, cultural and individual awareness that we see in women around us is, to a great extent, the result of these fiction writers who have brought about a new consciousness in the realm of traditional thinking. To mention a few writers like- Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geeta Mehta, Bharati Mukherji, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapoor and of course, Shobhaa De' have left indelible imprints on the readers of Indian fiction in English.

Shobhaa De' mainly focuses upon the vital aspects of existence and survival in high-class Indian society. 'Search for selfhood', 'split identity', 'lust for money and power', 'lack of ethics' are some of the major themes of her novels. De' is a realist because her female characters represent a true and realistic picture of the modern Indian woman. Closely acquainted with the world of modelling and Bollywood cinema, she beautifully mirrors the decaying moral values of this otherwise glittering and glorifying society. Geeta Barua, in her article, "Rise and Fall of a Star: An investigation of *Starry Nights*", remarks: "The novel is additionally a dependable depiction of the film world with every one of its perfidies, excitement, violations, untruths, and double-dealings and sexual misuse. Since Shobhaa De' the author has been for quite some time related with the Bombay film world as a columnist she knows it directly and has possessed the capacity to depict it well" (The Fiction of Shobhaa De, 174).

#### **Aasha Rani's Search For Selfhood**

Aasha Rani, a ravishingly beautiful film star, the dream-girl of the millions, is the heroine of the novel. In her childhood itself, she suffers from a deep mental anguish of the unsuccessful relationship of her parents. (We are haunted by a similar kind of relationship in

Arundhati Roy's novel, 'The God of Small Things', wherein the heroine, Ammu, suffers a similar mental agony and, somehow, wishes to escape from her parental home at Ayemenem). Aasha Rani's father, a renowned film producer, leaves his wife and two daughters for the sake of another woman. The abandoned family goes through a very tough time. Her mother is compelled to sell her flesh to run the family and pay for Aasha Rani's dancing classes. It is now Aasha Rani's turn to repay the debt. Instead of an emotional bond, they seem to share a business-like bond between them. Her mother pushes her in the never-ending glut of bluefilms and then again through sex in the crass world of Bollywood cinema. It is also a point to be noted that Shobhaa De' makes Aasha Rani's peculiar and compelling circumstances responsible for her being launched into the cine-world of abominable lust and greed.

Paradoxically enough, Aasha Rani's downfall begins as she rises in her film career. Extra-ordinarily fascinating with a perfect and seductive figure, she finds herself in the hands of Kishanbhai, a small film distributor. He gives Aasha Rani her first break, but in return, he exploits her physically. Due to her difficult childhood and unprotective father, Aasha Rani develops a feeling of hatred for men. Aasha Rani's forced entry into films and the change of her attitude towards men in general are ample proofs in themselves that Shobhaa De's novels are not without existential and psychological bearings. She tells Kishanbhai:

"All of you are just the same, but wait, I'll show you.

I will do to men what they try to do to me.

I'll screw you all, beat you at your game."

The use of such a language by Aasha Rani should not shock us, for such a use of language is quite natural for a woman like Aasha Rani, whom her own uncle in her childhood molested. Therefore, she has every right to give vent to her pent up anger towards men, her colonizers, who, like 'vultures' are ever-ready to pounce upon helpless 'doves' like her. Keeping in view Aasha Rani's words quoted above, one cannot help seeing an analogy between her and Shekhar Kapoor's heroine, "Phullan Devi", from the film *Bandit Queen*. Needless to say, their difficult past forced them to "beat" men in their own game and their own language.

Aasha Rani rejects Kishanbhai's love and falls in love with an already married man, Akshay Arora, the reigning star of the Hindi cinema. She loves him passionately and genuinely, but Akshay finds her love possessive and embarrassing. He refuses to marry Aasha Rani because marrying her would mean leaving his wife and children, and he does not dare to do so. This reminds one of a similar situation in Manju Kapoor's novel, 'Difficult Daughters'. Virmati, the heroine of the novel, is an easily impressionable young girl. When she meets Harish, the professor, and listens to him, she is enthralled by his intellectual personality. Soon they fall in love with each other, and Harish, an already married man, develops a sexual relationship with Virmati. Aasha Rani of *Starry Nights* and Virmati of *Difficult Daughters* seem to be sailing in the same boat as they both fall in love with married men who cannot marry them. Both the

women suffer from an identity crisis, searching and re-searching their selves. They both rebel against the established norms of society, but their rebellion proves fruitless. Virmati, although she succeeds in her endeavour, yet remains on the margin even after marriage; she does win a title for herself and is now referred to as 'the other woman'.

Obsessed with the thoughts of Akshay and failure in love, Aasha Rani tries to commit suicide in frustration. (In the same situation, Virmati also decides to commit suicide). Betrayed by Akshay, Aasha Rani tries to find solace, though reluctantly, in her relationship with Abhijit, another married man. (In *God of Small Things*, Ammu tries to find comfort in Velutha's arms after her unsuccessful marriage with a little known Bengali, a hardened drunkard). Once again, searching for the self, Aasha Rani, along with Abhijit, leaves for New Zealand. They thought they would not be disturbed there; however, Abhijit's father throws cold water on their plan by catching them at the New Zealand airport. He offers a big amount to Aasha Rani for sparing his son, Abhijit. She readily accepts the amount because he was not the man of her dreams; it was only Akshay and Akshay alone.

Heartbroken as she is, she goes to Wellington. There, an admirer proposes marriage. Bored, troubled, shattered and confused, Aasha Rani accepts the proposal and becomes Mrs Jammy Phillips. So far from the world of Hindi Cinema, she gladly dwindles into a wife. She, at last, experiences a sense of happiness, fulfilment and satisfaction after giving birth to a beautiful girl child. She names her Sasha and is delighted to imagine the bond that she would share with her, a bond based on mutual trust and understanding, unlike the one she had with her mother. Although Aasha Rani does not want to go back to India, she has to go because of her father's illness. And once she is back in India, she finds herself haunted by the glittering glory of the Hindi cinema. Everything comes back to her like a panorama-studios, stars, fans, lights etc. She thinks she missed it all; how much of an alien she was in New Zealand.

She prefers to stay in India, and Jammy gives Aasha Rani a chance to fulfil her dreams, and he leaves for Wellington with Sasha. But soon, Aasha realizes that a significant change had taken place in Bollywood cinema during a short span of five years. Her place in the film industry was grabbed and filled by her younger sister, Sudha. However, she is disappointed to get offers only for the roles of mother or mother-in-law. To get the main role, she agrees to go to bed with a young producer, Jojo.

Meanwhile, she receives the news from Sasha that Jammy was having an affair with her nanny. On reaching Wellington, she comes to know that her marriage was over. Once again, she experiences a sense of destabilization and dislocation and suffers from an acute sense of identity crisis. Confused, desperate and fragmented, she comes back to Madras, where every member of her family welcomes her. Appa's faith in her gives her the strength to re-start their old film studio.

Towards the end of the novel, we see Aasha Rani dreaming of Sasha, who has by now transformed into a beautiful maiden. She imagines herself ruling the film world once again through Sasha. "Sasha would be the sweetheart of millions, 'an unforgettable star! Oh yes,

Sasha would be tomorrow's Lover Girl". Thus, the show would go on.

#### Conclusion

It appears Aasha Rani's journey is complete; she seems to have liberated herself through her daughter, Sasha. Can we call it 'liberation'? It is just that Aasha Rani imagines Sasha to be "Tomorrow's Lover Girl". One may doubt if such a thing would ever happen because Sasha hates India and does not wish to come to India. She does not feel any affinity with her mother's country. Hence, it is nothing but a self-assumed solace, a sheer imagined compromise of Aasha Rani with her fate, her circumstances. Therefore, searching and re-searching the self is still on ...Will it ever be over???

The main concern of Shobhaa De's heroines in her novels is to search for identity in the male-dominated society, seek empowerment and self-independence, crave for a dignified existence, perform enormous responsibilities, and not give in to male dominance. Shobhaa De' portrays the urban elite women as they are rather than as they should be. Her heroines represent the transitional phase of modern Indian women; they are constantly struggling against the social mores of the patriarchal Indian society. Sometimes, it appears as though they are torn apart by the conflicting pulls of established social norms and their dreams to live a public life of their own, do what they desire without being frightened and forbidden by the patriarchs of the society. She gives her readers a peep into the heads and hearts of her heroines so that they know the causes of their anguish and agony, and what pleases and thrills them, and gives them a sense of fulfilment. Shobhaa De' gives her heroines perfect freedom to overthrow such despotic social and cultural norms which subjugate them or keep them in shackles.

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