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THE FEMINIST UPSURGE IN SHOBHA DE'S, "SNAPSHOTS"

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ABSTRACT

Shobha De, writer of pragmatic approaches and perfect personality of the written world for more than three decades. She almost depicts the incidents and things that is actually experienced or seen by her in her own life. Shobha De's novel *Snapshots*, which was published in 1995, is essentially a feminist work. The novel depicts the lives of six women of Santa Maria High School. Applying the proposition that the psychological health of a character is defined by the character's actions and behavior, all the six women discussed in this paper are found buried deep in this past. The six women – Swati, Rashmi, Reema, Surekha, Aparna and Noor of Snapshots-are stuck deep in their destructive impulses. The self-alienating forces not only affect their courage and intellectual strength but assume pathological proportions. Frustrations make these women susceptible to indoctrination and manipulation. Plagued by indecision, these women are psychologically maimed, emotionally unstable and cognitively wrong. They neither have the will to make healthy choices like Karuna, Maya, Mikki and Nisha nor do they alter their ideals of life in the light of a better considered set of ideals. Warped values and value-judgments; like violence, recklessness, aggression intemperance; lack of healthy commitments, lack of respect for the rights and needs of others; exploitative and maniacal pursuit of material success at all costs; that are directly opposite to mental health and human excellence, continue to be in force in them raising anxiety levels and thwarting their chances of self-actualization. Shobha De's repertoire of women shows some of them ill-equipped to manage the tensions of their life due to lack of maturity, dependency and so on. They resort to unrealistic solutions which, instead of relieving their anxiety, alienate them from their inner selves. As a result, development towards self-fulfillment gets sealed. Viewed on the basis of personality concepts of the Third Force Psychologists, Swati, Noor, Rashmi and other weak-willed women like Reema, Surekha and Aparna are fit into the group of sick personalities. Therefore I want to emphasis on six different female characters from different perspectives.

Key Words Are: self-alienating, anxiety, manipulation, susceptible and self-fulfillment.

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Shobha De has been a dynamic personality of nearly three decades; she has been the reigning deity of the written world. For years she has defined what society has been about and focused on the world of man and matters.

De was born in Maharashtra on January 7, 1948; 7:21:00; 5:30 (E of GMT); 72E50; 18N58. According to Phyllis Chubb her fiery ascendant Sagittarius, as an odd numbered sign, sets the stage for an independent, open-minded, frank, generous, sympathetic, and truthful and just one individual. (Chubb: 2002:issue03)

She has thrived on a well as survive the Polaris responses – the highest praise and the vilest criticism. Given to controversies, her literary status as a serious writer with social consciousness has been subjected to endless debates, ranging from heated to the most-heated arguments between her passionate adulators and merciless detractors. With three of her novels *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights* and *Sisters*, taken up as course materials by The School of Oriental African Studies and a few Indian Universities, Shobha De is viewed seriously as a writer of literary and social worth.

Shobha De's novel *Snapshots*, which was published in 1995, is essentially a feminist work. The novel depicts the lives of six women of Santa Maria High School. Applying the proposition that the psychological health of a character is defined by the character's actions and behavior, all the six women discussed in this paper are found buried deep in this past. Madhumalti Adhikari discusses at length the equation of power in the novel. The analyses the work of De in respect of the other writers and comes to the conclusion that De, like other feminist writers, is concerned with the alignment of power that exerts physical, political, social and economic control over a woman in order to fragment her. De once claimed in *The Hindustan Times Magazine*.

'I write with a great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman's situation'.

The six women – Swati, Rashmi, Reema, Surekha, Aparna and Noor of *Snapshots*-are stuck deep in their destructive impulses.

In general, in these women the real self or the inner urge to grow into wholeness is discouraged from maturing by the ill-managed anxiety caused by the fulfilled needs. The self-alienating forces not only affect their courage and intellectual strength but assume pathological proportions. Frustrations make these women susceptible to indoctrination and manipulation. Plagued by indecision, these women are psychologically maimed, emotionally unstable and cognitively wrong. They neither have the will to make healthy choices like Karuna, Maya, Mikki and Nisha nor do they alter their ideals of life in the light of a better considered set of ideals. Warped values and value-judgments; like violence, recklessness, aggression intemperance; lack of healthy commitments, lack of respect for the rights and needs of others; exploitative and maniacal pursuit of material success at all costs; that are directly opposite to mental health and human excellence, continue to be in force in them raising anxiety levels and thwarting their chances of self-actualization.

Shobha De's repertoire of women shows some of them ill-equipped to manage the tensions of their life due to lack of maturity, dependency and so on. They resort to unrealistic solutions which, instead of relieving their anxiety, alienate them from their inner selves. As a result, development towards self-fulfillment gets sealed. Viewed on the basis of personality concepts of the Third Force Psychologists, Swati, Noor, Rashmi and other weak-willed women like Reema, Surekha and Aparna are fit into the group of sick personalities.

The glamorous singer-actress Swati of *Snapshots* is also one of the neurotic women characters of Shobha De. The sympathetic sarcasm with which De treats the neurotic drives of Anjali of *Socialite Evenings* is replaced with disgust in treating Swati's compulsive need for forging an identity through power and success. Whereas Anjali's obsessive desire for men and money are the result of her frustration with marriage and her adolescent concept of identity, Swati's mad pursuit after power and success is a result of her insecure and inferior feelings, with which she has been raised during her childhood.

It is unfortunate that Swati's mother who could devote all her time, energy and resources to the welfare of the unknown poor was contented to limit her maternal responsibilities towards her own child to the physical needs. But even with physical needs, the attitude in which these needs are satisfied is also important to the psychological development of the child. If at all Swati felt wanted and appreciated by her parents, especially by her mother, it was merely to humour her. While breathlessly waiting for her name to be announced as the 'Best-Girl' of the school, the first thing to flash in Swati's mind is the satisfied expression on the face of her parents.

Swati had concentrated single mindedly and systematically for four years to be made the head-girl of the school. She had believed that she alone deserved the honor. She had put in unstinted back-door efforts to bag the 'Best Girl' of the year shield.

As Swati grows into a young woman, instead of getting diminished with the passage of time, her neurotic needs grow stronger. Only her targets are altered. She has always enjoyed flaunting her female charms with ingenuity to impress everyone around and feel powerful, both with men and women.

Swati's relationship with men and her attitude to marriage confirm her obsessive need to feel powerful by her sexuality. She brags about her sexual conquests, "I can still get'em all – any man, any age, any color." 2

During her school days Swati luxuriated in Nawaz's dog like devotion and enjoyed her bloated ego when he gifted her frequently with stolen articles, ranging from paper knife, petty decanter and cheap trinkets to a Silver Cartier lighter and a priceless ancestral ring. Wielding her sexuality to her best advantages, Swati has kept many a man under her spell. In her freakish passion for exercising her female tricks and in her search for money she has a number of men figuring in her life. Besides many impromptu affairs, she stole Aparna's husband Rohit during one of her visits to India. Then she married Bridges, captain of the English Football team. She lived as Mrs Chowdary for some time, latched on

with a nineteen year old rock-star for a while and then married Juan and divorced him.

All these relationships prove Swati to be a calculated manipulator and a power-mongering nymphomaniac. She takes great pride in having negotiated so many tough marriage contracts to be "rich and secure". She is frustrated in her marriage with Juan; she married him expecting that he would make her rich. But Juan gave her allowance just sufficient for pocket money. Juan had ordered that she would have no credit cards, no joint-accounts and no access to Juan's real wealth. Swati felt powerless and isolated without money and without the freedom to bask in the admiration of men whom she conquered and let orbiting her like satellites. She has neither the faith nor the intention to nurture faith, in enduring human relationships. Her open declaration that she rejoices in her sexuality, is not born of a healthy liberated attitude to sex. It is rather, a pervert's claim for licentious indulgence.

Being vindictive, Swati manipulates Aparna's husband Rohit. In doing so, Aparna's husband is not hers. Swati wants to hurt and humiliate Aparna. More than the bitterness caused by the several defeats, Swati has always been jealous of Aparna's smartness, cool headedness and efficiency. Swati was unwilling to openly accept and appreciate Aparna, though secretly, she desired to be all that Aparna was. With all her cunning and scheming, she could not beat Aparna. This leaves her piqued and she gives vent to her vindictiveness in spells of violent rage.

Swati's haughty reaction to Dolly and Noor, on several occasions, proves her irrational anger. When Dolly fails to rap for Swati's devilish atrocities, she is denounced in the harshest of terms and is subjected to rustication. Karen Horney aptly cites, among the recent historical figures, Hitler as the best illustration of vindictive pride because of the humiliating childhood experience that he had, he gave his life to a fanatic desire to triumph.

Swati is a victim of 'basic anxiety'. And that the only motivation course in Swati is her selfishness. In a healthy personality, the need for success is a motivation for a quest for wholeness and a desire for power is not in itself necessarily neurotic. It springs from identification with a cause

or from the possession of superior abilities. This is exemplified by a comparison drawn between Karuna's (Socialite Evening), natural and justifiable self-interest and Swati's manipulative ways to promote her interest.

The fragments of Rashmi-episode in Snapshots tell us about a woman whose safety needs are predominant than the love-needs or esteem-needs. Rashmi's tensions over her unfulfilled economic security are so persistent that it becomes the cause of making her life an irretrievably ignoble existence.

The degeneration that Rashmi undergoes as a result of her ungratified need for security is, from the status of a talented school-girl to a gross sensualist. While at school, Rashmi is described as smart at studies, better at dramatics, good in debates and proficient in gymnastics. She is said to have bagged away the 'best all rounder' award year after year. As a grown up woman she is pictured as smiling bitterly, thinking of all those ill-fated prizes that have been sold away to see her through poverty. Her talents have been rated disqualifications in the film world where she wanted to achieve and settle. Her honesty and trophies have not taken her far. At the end of a screen test, she was told that she would be acceptable if she comes again after sometime-a bit fairer, losing her perfect accent and most important of all, 'forgetting her talents'. Since then she has been struggling in vain to manage within the meager economic resources. She is so pre-occupied with concerns about the primary needs for food and shelter, that she lives unconcerned about the higher and the more sophisticated growth needs.

She plays the mere pleasure-girl to Parminder, the lover-boy of Bombay Film World. She dare not nag him to get her small roles lest she should be tossed out of her rut. To combat starvation and find shelter, she accepted odd assignments, audio-visual commercials and anything that brought the much needed cash. The irony about Rashmi's life is that she acquiesces to Parminder to ensure economic security, but Parminder is close fisted and literally drains off her hard earned money causing more heart-breaks for Rashmi.

Besides, Rashmi's self-esteem gets severely wounded as Parminder subjects her to insults and humiliations. When he learns that she is pregnant, he leaves a short, sadistic good-bye note and disappears. Thereafter Rashmi depends on "faceless uncles" who drift in and out of her dirty bed. In bitterness Rashmi envies the prostitutes of Champabai's brothel who seemed far happier than herself because their future seemed more secure. Her confused life that bears a stigma deprived of social- esteem and self-esteem as well.

To blot out the pain caused by the ill treatment done to her illegitimate son, she takes to tranquilizers alcohol and more sex. The practical difficulties of child-rearing as a single parent give her agonizing moments. She says that her son's question, why she could not be like other mothers, pushes her into lacerations at times and her son's big eyes keep haunting her. Rashmi also hungers for the life of peace and happiness. But she excuses herself from doing anything to change the situation. She is contented, justifying it as inevitable.

Deserted by Parminder, Rashmi could have taken a firm decision to revive her talents to reconstruct her life. But her uncritical acceptance of a directionless pattern of life as something fixed and beyond her control, keeps her away from the self-actualizing tendency. The novel clearly states that Rashmi has always detested responsibilities. Her untidy and smelly house is reflective of the shabby thinking of a fatalist. She is unwilling to outgrow her pervasive inertia and her fascination is for playing the game of make-beliefs. Therefore the self-actualizer's trait of realistic perception of life is lacking in Rashmi.

Now her full time job is developing and practicing the art of providing bed comfort to men and keeping them enslaved. She elaborates upon the nuances of how a woman should make herself an incurable habit to a man and an inevitable aspect of him, by her "service", so that she can please him and find her in comforts and safety. She pays her full attention to play this shameless game to perfection. Rashmi admits that her present lifestyle given her money and freedom and she enjoys this kind of 'liberation'.

Reema is another tragic non-self actualizer. She also subsists on her vulgar and manipulative strategies. Like Rashmi, Surekha and Swati, Reema also lives under the tattered mask of a happy woman. The novel describes Reema as,

.....a fringe person, vague and woolly, who just went along with the rest without anyone registering her presence.....person without any real opinions.³

Reema's relationships with men – with Raju at school, with Ravi in marriage and with her husband's brother Randhir in secret – have all been such that exist between the conqueror and the conquered. Even the casual smiles and expressions of these men made her feel inferior, weak and helpless. The neglect accorded to her by her rich but loveless husband Ravi has left her an emotional wreck. Reema's life with her "prize catch", Ravi is described as a sexless existence. Ravi has turned it into a sort of warfare perpetrated at his will on a weak enemy. He has been indifferent to his wife's feelings, disappointments and longings most of the time. On her wedding night itself, Rashmi discovered that she had married the wrong man who left her completely cold, physically as well as emotionally.

Reema also fails to emerge as a self-actualizer. There is no motivation for growth or maturation of character and development in Reema. She continues to be the same "fringe person", more depersonalized without any intention of investing her life with new ambitions or efforts towards achievements. The stagnation of her sluggish life is betrayed by the compacted fat in her body, accumulated over years.

Like Rashmi and Surekha, Reema also spares herself of all kinds of risks. She is afraid and unwilling to alter the sick and deadening routine of her life. Preoccupied with the spurious, the fake and the dishonest, she is perfectly adapted to herd-conformity. She also prefers playing safe like her other friends in the novel. The novel describes Reema being always in a flap with her sight fixed on the next big buy – a piece of jewelers or a prized acre of farmland or gold in its most basic form. Greed for physical pleasures and material assets keeps her life going.

Shobha De gives graphic details of how Reema freaks out on her fuzzy home. She couldn't stop getting it decorating and showing it off. Her time and talents are spent on the mechanical addition and upgrading of her Bonsai collections, ceramic pots, fiber-glass sculptures, collage, wall-papers, furniture, imported shampoos, soaps, perfumes, microwave oven, food-processor, soda-maker etc. She proudly walks any visitor around her house as if she were one among those beautiful yet fragile, costly but showy articles. Her creativity hinges only on devising themes for her endless kitty parties; trying ingenious tricks with cosmetics and arranging smoking and gossiping sessions.

Surekha, another old student of Santa Maria School is also one of the emotional failures constituting the sad spectacle of the novel. Surekha's marriage like that of her other classmates, has not given her the companionship, excitement and the freedom. Like Reema, Surekha is also not keen on getting her marriage annulled, despite her awareness that none of her psychological needs is likely to be fulfilled by it. At the same time, she is willing to put up with her mechanical and boring husband who guarantees to provide basic needs for food, shelter and other comforts. She is afraid that her husband Harish might leave her, if she made a serious demand for freedom and companionship.

Surekha's most intensely felt need is, to ensure a place for her in her married life. But the reality of her situation is the most depressing. Her childhood, into which the novel gives a casual insight, seems to have been an inadequate experience lived through without a sense of belongingness. The usual attachment that the daughters have for maternal homes in Indian families is not expressed by her. Her visit to her mother's home is more of a formality than something eagerly looked forward to or enjoyed. She speaks of her mother's behavior as odd and hateful. Between Surekha and her mother-in-law there are only orders passed to be obeyed and criticisms flung to be tolerated by her.

In her husband's home, her very physical movements are restricted. Her eagle-eyed mother-in-law keeps constant watch on her outings. She does not even have a small room to call of her own.

On her visit to Reema's house, she looks around longingly and says, "I'd love to have a space like this. May be not as grand but just a room called my own...." This suggests that the freedom and privacy that Surekha wants to enjoy is to be interpreted not only in terms of place but also in terms of emotions. (Snapshots: 151).

In such an oppressive atmosphere of her home, Surekha's options are severely limited. Her idea of freedom is not a denial of mutual dependency between husband and wife. She believes freedom lies in the mutual approval of each other's individuality. But, Surekha is caught between her husband who is there merely to pay all the bills and demand his conjugal rights periodically and her ill-tempered and suspicious mother-in-law

The narrator's description of Surekha's relationship with her school-mate Dolly as an "...intense, mutually-dependent camaraderie.... inextricably intertwined", gives the clue for understanding what Surekha needed most and missed most during more than fifteen years of her life. The reason for Surekha restoring to lesbian relationship with Dolly has to be traced beyond its physical aspects into the psychological aspects. (Snapshots: 159)

Aparna of Snapshots is one of the six neurotic women who are designated; the inadequacies of Aparna are explored and sympathetically recounted by Shobha De. She offers a number of flashbacks of Aparna's childhood, as she does with Mikki, Swati and Aasha Rani. They throw sufficient light revealing the conduct and life of this corporate woman, Aparna. The narrator, commenting on Aparna's infancy states:

Aparna had grown up with shame, Shame about her body, shame about her adolescent

Looks shame about her background, shame about practically every aspect of her life.

It was the environment she was raised in. Guilt was its defining feature. She couldn't Recall a time when she was't made to feel acutely conscious of every small pleasure May be emotional or physical. (Snapshots: 06).

Human beings form self-perception based on the physical and mental attitudes, from the simple to the profound, that are taught to them from very early days. The relationship between the physique and the psyche and its impact on behavior is basic to the understanding of Aparna's personality.

Aparna's love-needs, when she married were that of a woman of the changed order with new equations. Love-needs for Aparna, were not purely sexual needs but marriage cannot and need not be divorced from it. The narrator makes insightful comments in the course of the novel, upon Aparna's views on her sexual needs making clear that she is not lustful.

On such a redefinition of love, Aparna expected to fashion her marriage. She needed emotional satisfaction not only for pleasure but also to deepen her love for Rohit, to enrich life, to increase toleration and to confirm mutual dignity. Rohit and Aparna were not sexually incompatible couple and she did not have an emotionally starved life. But the clash between his double standards and her uninhibited and upfront approach triggers off separation.

Noor one of the six women of Snapshots, a more a psychotic than neurotic whose love needs and security needs have suffered severe damage since infancy. Her life is loveless and insecure. She lives on the fragile edge of insanity throughout, till she meets with her horrifying end. She is a psychologically sick personality in whom there is not even the minimum awareness and perception expected of an ordinary human being about the need for growth and self-actualization. Only a healthy person can prioritize his needs and involve himself in goal-oriented activities. An emotional cripple like Noor with insidious background is incapacitated for healthy aspirations.

The very physique of Noor is a reflection of her sick psyche. Born of materially and emotionally impoverished parents, in an undisciplined and broken home, she had been denied affection. Her childhood impressions and experiences with an irresolute father and a cold withdrawn mother were actually worst. The powerful incentives of genuine parental affection and warmth, which induce the

inculcation of lovable qualities in a child, have always been denied to Noor.

Noor could not develop a healthy self-concept. She had been sabotaged by parental exploitation. Her sexually demanding brother had abused her, everyone had ignored her and her favorite Swati had also rejected her. Thus, she had lived in loneliness, alienated from the others as well as from her 'real self'. So she had never raised questions about her needs, potentials, future etc. The novel does not provide details about her life after she left the school. But, after years when she appears at the get-together, her posture, appearance and behavior are clear evidences of the empty life she had been living. She is found withdrawn and curled up in a corner. Her nervousness, clumsiness, schizophrenic conduct and inconsistent moods betray the unrelieved loneliness and the shrinking process that she has undergone as a result of her frustrated need of love, security and belongingness.

Thus, Noor's life has run riot because of the multiple abrasions. The foregoing account of the accretion of passivity, malleability, fatalism and self-depreciation of Noor need her away from any consciousness awareness and self-discovery, needed for self-actualization. Self-fulfillment is implied in the efficacious actions of an individual, decided by the nature of social contacts in which the individual is born and brought up. In Noor's life both childhood and adolescence have been disheveled phases, full of ambiguities and illogical emotional violations.

Noor's pathetic dependence on Surekha for some time and Swati later, is an over extended gesture. Unlike the women protagonists discussed earlier, Noor is imbecile. She has no idea of healthy, expensive and dynamic moves. Finding a strange equation in her incestuous relationship with her brother, showing sudden but brief connections to her past through an amazing memory, resorting to black-mailing and trying to control or taunt her friends with sinister comments etc., are symptoms of a psychologically disturbed personality.

The unfulfilled need of love and security drives Noor into the depths of psychosis. Her violent death by slashing her wrists in the final enactment of her frustration. Her body sprawled at an awkward

angle and limbs contorted, looking ungainly and awkward in death as in life, summarize symbolically the total dissipation of her potentials and the emotional wreckage that has precipitated her final collapse. Swati's vignette at the end of the novel is,

'.....We all have our lives to lead, Reema has found her way of dealing with Her frustrations. You've got yours. And I've got mine....' (Snapshots: 215)

This puts succinctly for the readers' understanding that their prolonged neurotic efforts to cope with their frustrations have only revived their dissatisfaction, instead of ending them. Hence it is arguable that these women show no hopes of parleying their potentials into tools of real empowerment and harness to the task of achieving fulfillment.

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