



Modern Female Identity in the Context of Patriarchal Society: An Analysis of Shobhaa De's *Snapshots*

M.S. Brindha M.A., M.Phil., NET
Ph.D Scholar (Part Time) in English,
PG & Research Department of English,
Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Thindal, Erode.

ABSTRACT

Shobhaa De stands as a bold and outspoken voice in contemporary Indian fiction. Her writings openly reflect the lived experiences of modern women who question and resist age-old customs, traditions, and superstitions that seek to confine them. This research article focuses on a critical study of Shobhaa De's prominent novel *Snapshots*, highlighting her representation of the patriarchal framework of Indian society alongside the evolving perspectives and assertive outlook of modern women navigating this social system.

Key Words: Contemporary reality, New Women, Customs, Love, Sex, Marriage, Feminism

Indian Writing in English has secured a respected position in world literature despite facing initial doubts and critical resistance. As the genre evolved, women novelists played a crucial and irreplaceable role in shaping its direction. Through the richness and volume of their literary output, these writers have added depth to the tradition by portraying women's realities, including their personal experiences, social challenges, and the various tensions they encounter in everyday life.

Shobhaa De stands out as a writer who fearlessly questions established traditions and moral conventions, turning private disagreement into vocal defiance. Unlike earlier women novelists who often presented narratives filtered through male viewpoints, De foregrounds a consciously female perspective, focusing on women's emotional and psychological experiences. As a sharp social commentator, she expands the scope of Indian English fiction by offering insightful depictions of interpersonal relationships. Her works reflect the rise of the modern Indian woman, one who actively challenges patriarchal values and strives to overcome restrictive social norms.

Shobhaa De attempts to bring to light the inner world of women living in urban settings. Her novels delve into the concealed aspects of women's lives and offer a truthful depiction of the modern woman. She presents the varied dimensions of female experience and their ongoing quest for selfhood within a restrictive and often irrational social environment. De recognizes the strength and newly awakened awareness of the contemporary woman and draws attention to her struggles beneath the surface of a glamorous lifestyle. Based on her keen observation of women associated with the film industry, she explores the tensions, challenges, and dilemmas encountered by women in present-day Indian society. Through this approach, she critically examines the socio-cultural forces that influence the changing roles of women. Although many of her narratives are situated in Bombay, Shobhaa De's writing extends beyond regional boundaries, offering a universal perspective on modern realities and the rise of the new woman. Her work resonates with broader themes of female identity and transformation.

The novelist presents the concept of the “new woman” as someone who actively resists the deep-rooted oppression faced by women in every area of life. Her female characters are bold enough to oppose injustice and refuse to accept unfair treatment. They are shown as affluent, well-educated, skilled, and highly ambitious individuals. Confident and determined, these women challenge male authority and insist on equal status with men. They demonstrate strong self-belief in pursuing their goals and openly reject the idea of male sexual privilege. However, the novelist also points out that certain women in urban settings adopt misguided ways of living, characterized by fragile relationships and excessive materialism. Such women are portrayed as a sharp contrast to the conventional Indian woman, who was traditionally portrayed as obedient and reliant on her husband.

This article examines Shobhaa De’s novel *Snapshots* through a realistic lens, emphasizing their depiction of the evolving social conditions of upper-class women in urban India. In these narratives, the majority of female characters begin by asserting their individuality through resistance and rebellion, but gradually submit to the norms upheld by a male-dominated society. As a result, the ongoing conflict between social constraints and the quest for women’s independence hinders the protagonists from attaining a complete and harmonious sense of identity.

In *Snapshots*, the characters struggle to negotiate the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity, yet Swati alone succeeds in breaking free from social limitations and bringing about meaningful change. Although Reema, Aparna, Noor, Rashmi, and Surekha challenge accepted social norms, each ultimately suffers serious repercussions. Noor enters a forbidden incestuous relationship with her brother Nawaz and eventually takes her own life. Rashmi gives birth to a child outside marriage, and her son faces social exclusion; despite her involvement in several relationships, she continues to long for emotional stability and commitment. Reema and Surekha reflect similar inner conflicts: while Reema engages in an illicit affair with her brother-in-law, she remains bound by tradition when it comes to her daughter’s freedom to choose a life partner. Likewise, Surekha shares a same-sex relationship with Dolly but lacks the courage to confront her husband and mother-in-law or openly accept her true desires.

This is because these women are, in a sense, ‘liberated’ and belong to a particular class of Indian society. Having outgrown the old norms of behavior in recent years, they are no longer prudish in public. The concept of morality based on love for a single person has become outdated. They embrace the enjoyment of life through the physical consummation of love, both before and after marriage, and even outside of it. The notions of marriage and constancy in love have undergone a significant transformation in modern society. “Indian readers should not look for prototypes of Sita or Draupadi in contemporary society” (98).

The novel explores the inner lives of six women—Aparna, Rashmi, Swati, Reema, Surekha, and Noor—who are bound by patriarchal norms within Indian society. Each of them attempts to rise above these limitations while seeking personal freedom and self-fulfillment. The women, who have shared a close friendship since their school years, reunite at Reema’s residence, where she arranges a party to welcome Swati. After living abroad for many years with her Christian husband, a successful writer, Swati returns to Bombay. She works as a television anchor and produces programmes on contemporary social issues. Although she initially conceals the real reason for her visit, she has actually come to India to study and record the lives and position of women in urban society. Swati informs Reema of her arrival beforehand, much to Reema’s excitement, and Reema, in turn, invites the rest of the group and plans an elaborate celebration. Despite some reluctance, the women attend the gathering in the spirit of enjoyment. As the evening progresses, the reunion becomes lively with shared memories of the past, many of which still shape their present lives. However, unresolved tensions and past grievances soon emerge, resulting in blame and bitterness, and the night concludes on a tragic note with Noor’s suicide.

A striking feature of these women is their resilience, as life’s difficulties fail to diminish their determination. Although society traditionally expects them to remain quiet and compliant as wives and mothers, they seldom conform to such restrictive roles. Instead, they question and resist the patriarchal structures designed to limit their freedom. Bold and self-assured, they challenge both social expectations and internalized norms without feeling guilt or remorse. “Each one of the women is trapped by a patriarchal society and their own social

conditioning into a situation from which there is no escape except through a subterranean defiance of societal expectations”(246).

Reunited after many years, they speak openly about their earlier experiences as well as their current romantic involvements. Their conversations reveal a clear inclination toward personal freedom, sensuality, and sexual autonomy. Swati, who brings the group together, displays visible excitement, and the novelist captures this moment in vivid and expressive language:

“Swati’s face was swathed in smiles as she pretended she was a catwalk mannequin parading up and down, humming an MTV hit, ‘I am too sexy’. Everybody laughed. Within seconds the atmosphere altered. Swati announced, ‘I am breaking all the rules today. Summon a slave. It is champagne time. Come on gals, drink up, drink up. This is an occasion. The best. I haven’t felt this exhilarated since I lost my virginity – and all of you know how, when, where and with whom that happened … Let’s drink to fun. Fuck it! Let’s just drink. I mean DRINK”(91).

The women’s dissatisfaction with men, along with their sense of relief in the absence of male presence, offers them a feeling of independence. In exclusively female spaces, they freely express their anger and complaints about men and their husbands. Their way of life reflects the conflict between inherited traditions and modern social conditions, and this sense of frustration frequently pushes them to question established norms, even to the extent of forming relationships outside marriage.

In Shobhaa De’s novels, women are portrayed as active agents rather than submissive figures confined to the home. They question the authority of patriarchal values and the constraints of the joint family structure, assert their independence, and confront established moral standards. Reema’s guidance to Surekha clearly illustrates the tension between traditional expectations and modern attitudes:

“You just have to assert yourself once. Once your husband becomes a hundred percent dependent on you, he won’t look elsewhere. Men like their comforts. And men are spoilt lazy babies. Feed them well. Fuck them regularly and sit tight. That is the way to keep them. Control them. The rest is easy. Believe me – I was in your shoes not so long ago”(161).

In the novel, the majority of the women—excluding Noor—enter marriage at a young age but gradually become discontented with their married lives. This sense of frustration drives them to pursue relationships beyond marriage, thus questioning and resisting patriarchal conventions. Shobhaa De presents these women as confident, self-reliant, and professionally accomplished, continually attempting to establish authority within prevailing power systems. The urge to attain and exercise power over others stands out as a key psychological motive and thematic focus in her fiction.

Shobhaa De’s fiction highlights the importance of an equitable sharing of power, suggesting that any imbalance leads to social conflict and moral double standards. At the same time, her perspectives on love, sexuality, and marriage set her apart from other women writers. Many of her female characters do not fully reflect everyday realities or represent Indian womanhood in its entirety, as they largely emerge from the privileged, urban elite of metropolitan society.

De depicts sexuality with striking openness in order to mirror the shifting social attitudes of contemporary society. In the novel, women actively pursue, experience, and negotiate power, gradually coming to view sexuality as a means of self-assertion. Sexuality is portrayed as extending beyond mere physical desire and operates as a symbol of power, while male authority over female sexuality represents a wider impulse toward control—an idea that is acknowledged even by minor characters such as Champabai. “Never give yourself to any man for free. You know why? Men don’t value anything they get so easily. That is why we are here: to satisfy their lust, not for sex but power. Power over women. Power over us – you and me. If they buy your sex, pay for you, they feel like kings. Give it to them with love for nothing and they will kick you in the gut”(47).

The six women friends in the novel are depicted as free from the constraints of traditional social practices and value systems. By dismissing accepted codes of feminine behavior, they directly confront male authority and patriarchal power. They maintain that women can successfully perform—and even excel in—roles conventionally reserved for men, both in physical capability and intellectual strength. As a result, the women in

Snapshots are shown as more dominant than the male characters. Men such as Rohit, Prem, Balbir, and Raju fail to exert control over them. Through this portrayal, Shobhaa De represents her female characters as empowered by their sexuality, which becomes a means to challenge and undermine patriarchal cultural frameworks.

In conclusion, Shobhaa De's fiction positions women within a complex interplay of traditional values and contemporary social realities. While many female characters attempt to transcend or mediate this tension, they often end up conforming to the very patriarchal structures they initially challenge. At the same time, De's narratives do not merely document submission; they also foreground women who consciously resist and critique dominant cultural codes. By doing so, De highlights both the persistent constraints imposed on women and the potential for agency and resistance within a rigid socio-cultural framework.

Works Cited

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