

Language and Style in Shobha De's Novels

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Abstract: This article deals with the use of language and style in Shobha De's novels. Through analyzing linguistic style in the novels readers may understand her thematic concerns and expand their critical appreciation further. On the flip side though, it is her thematic concerns that influence her choice of certain linguistic style for her writings. The writer has selected feminism and cultural concerns in contemporary India as her main focus. To address this issue and make a strong statement, she has introduced some strong women characters in her novels. The women in her novels, especially the heroines are from a high business class of the society in India. These are the best candidates in her endeavor to challenge the old norms and societal conventions that have held the progress of women in a patriarchal society. The fact that they are not economically dependent on their men counterparts in a relationship meant that they have no reason to be afraid of speaking their mind. As a result her novels exhibit brazen, brave, bizarre, out of the ordinary, explicit, candid and sexually charged language and narrative style. This is a deliberate attempt at presenting a shock treatment and thereby creating awareness in a society, in which women emancipation has yet a long way to go.

Keywords: new women, new men, irony, brazen language, morality, conventions, soft porn, shock treatment.

Stylistics or the use of language in literature is an important aspect of literary texts which enhances meaning. It is a deliberate attempt by writers who are at the top of their art to provide more than just narration in their texts. They enhance their writings with intricate stylistical flavors that the reader with experience is able to distinguish them from other writers. Though the basic purpose of writers is not to simply toy with vocabulary, but to make statement about important issues in society, linguistic prowess is undoubtedly part and parcel of literary tools. Shobha De has written several novels with the main thematic concern being focused around the issue of women in society. However, the way she portrays her characters and explores their stories is quite unique in linguistic style.

Shoba De's writings have a distinct place in the modern literature of India. She is particularly interested in exploring the urban life and contemporary global issues surrounding women as related with the Indian situation. In this continually changing contemporary world, women are aspiring to realize their dreams of self-sufficiency and independence, in a society that presents them with formidable challenges. The rise of the higher-middle class society in India creates opportunities but also presents challenges for the feminine gender in particular. It is this kind of intricate dilemma which Shobha De portrays with her unique style of candidness.

Her stories are marked by their candid portrayal of sexuality, marital or love relationships, as well as the culture of the Indian middle class society. Her characters aspire to find a wiggle room in the conflicting contemporary culture and traditional cultural values and conventions. By reading her novels the reader explores the lives of contemporary Indian women in urban settings. Their struggle for freedom from the shackles of traditions and conventions basically makes the core of her concerns. Just as the women in her literature, she is in a continuous struggle with traditional norms as she discusses sexuality with candid and uninhibited portraiture.

She stubbornly writes with freedom, breaking all taboos about women characters, who equally sojourn challenging many of societal conventions. They express themselves with candid admission of sexual desires, which women in real life tend to suppress for fear of societal reprisal and shame. She

writes her novels in a way morality and convention goes out of the window to open for the reader a new window through which they could experience the intimate thoughts of her women characters. By breaking the glass ceiling in to the discussions of sexuality and sexual desire, Shoba De attempts to confront and challenge crippling societal norms and brings women's plights to the surface.

According to Bhawesh Kumar:

De's novels provide a raw and unflinching portrayal of the emotional and psychological realities that underpin married life. "Starry Nights" delves into the inner world of a woman who grapples with loneliness and emotional isolation within her marriage. The novel offers an intimate glimpse into her thoughts, fears, and hopes, highlighting the emotional toll that a lack of connection can exact on one's mental well-being. "Strange Obsession" delves further into the psychological complexities of marriage by intertwining past traumas with present relationships. De expertly weaves the characters' psychological wounds into the fabric of their marriages, illustrating how unresolved emotional baggage can infiltrate and disrupt even the most intimate of connections. (Kumar 6)

Shobha De has written novels such as *Socialite Evening*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, *Second Thoughts*, and *Strong Obsession*, and has written critical pieces as well. Her first novel, *Socialite Evening* depicts so much of her own personal life story that it is viewed by many as an autobiographical fiction. In this novel, Shobha De has demonstrated that she is not completely antiestablishment as she has depicted an elite society in India in which many of the traditional values and traditional moralities of the society are being eroded. Her other novels show a bit different depiction of traditional conventions as they hamper the freedom of the women in the patriarchal societal systems. In such a struggle for freedom the women are shown to struggle to find their place and identity in the society. Much of her writing is concerned about the lives of women in contemporary elite Indian society.

She depicts with some openness and clear depiction uninhibited secrets of women in elite business communities in India. She explores the dirty games and dark realities that

come into play as these women characters navigate themselves in a cut-throat business, marriage as well as sexual struggles of the upper class India. Through distinct language and style which reflects contemporary Indian business upper class, she depicts the interplay between power, money and sexual relationships. She digs deep into the cultural decay and corruption of morality with her candid depiction of tricks and schemes that her characters have to play in order to have the upper hand in such entanglements. There is a lot of irony and pun in her depiction of her stories that show conflicts not only between modernity and culture but also conflicts between upper class and middle class societies in the business world.

De portrays women characters from rich families who break almost all of the societal conventions and morality. In a way her deviant characters provide an outlook in to the fight that women were waging for their freedom against the patriarchal norms which pertained for the most part in the society. By giving a shock treatment with her sexually candid narrations, she presents the stories of women who posed a direct challenge to the hypocrisy in traditional households and arranged marriages. Shobha De's depiction of sexuality doesn't stop in man-woman relationships of love or marriage as she also delves in to the lesbian sexuality and its extreme excesses as in her novel *Strange Obsession*. According to Suryawanshi and Kotkar:

Shobha De writes about female friendship, decay in social values and change in the attitude of young entrepreneur towards wealth, they are making money just for the sake of making money, there is perspective left, no thought of any kind of responsibility other than they have towards making more money. That is a single agenda. They have not contact with reality. (Suryawanshi and Kotkar 65)

Shobha De's novels are peculiarly known for their usage of strong libidinal promiscuity and a highly sexualized behavior. They are full of women characters that have broken many of societal traditional taboos and conventions. They don't conform by the old value that women should keep their chastity until marriage. The characters that she portrays are women who are involved not only in premarital sex but also in some instances of extra-marital sexual affairs. This creates marital discord with their husbands and in many cases leads up to separations or divorces. However, as the women in her novels are not bound to the ties of traditional conventions and norms, their next step is to find new sexual partners or husbands again.

As a result, divorce is not frowned upon in her class of 'new women'. This puts the old traditional norms of the society on its head. The challenge to patriarchy in her novels is not confined to showing only women who stay true to their marriage or those who keep their chastity but are oppressed by their husbands. Her novels boldly show women characters who don't necessarily abide by the marital norms and moralities of fidelity in relationships. When some of the characters notice that their male partners are having extra-marital affairs or when they are not physically and emotionally fulfilling their sexual desires, they precede to satisfy their libido promiscuously with extra-marital affairs

of their own. The language and narration Shobha De employs portrays her characters as complete deviant and free-minded women, who are not bothered about culture or convention when it comes to libidinal concerns. With lustful descriptions and style of language used by women characters, Shobha De challenges the old assumptions that it was only males who were trapped by the baits of libido.

Another aspect of her style of narration is the usage of the power of seduction by her women characters. She discloses with candid presentation about how women are able to manipulate sexually their male counter parts to fulfill their desires. By being sexually promiscuous and breaking all taboos, some women characters in her novels are able to enslave the males into doing anything they wanted them to do. Her portraiture of these kinds of women shows the superiority of libidinal energy in women and the power of seduction techniques that they have over men. Her women characters attitude to sex as well as to marital relationship is transactional, in that they see such bonds as business prospects rather than institutions of morality and familial fulfillments. Due to this kind of mentality, there is less emotional attachment and love is virtually considered a naiveté. It poses a strong challenge to old customs and norms which are highly revered in the Indian society regarding the sanctity of marriage and family. The role of women in her novels has transformed from one of traditionally known portraiture of humble, meek, and soft nature of women into a wild and free-minded women characters. She is able to do this by selecting women characters from a higher economic class in the urban settings of the country to give credibility and realistic sense to their actions. According to Sumedha Sharma:

Shobha De is renowned for bold and frank style of writing. She explored the lives of bored housewives and their loveless rich husband and family. Her novels mirror the life styles of the elite and the middle classes of urban world. (Sharma 130)

Shobha De attains her objectives of woman emancipation via portraying the 'new women' of the corporate world who have no dependency on men for financial needs. These women characters don't exploit men for money or seduce them to get their wealth. But they are very strong headed and don't abide by the traditional conventions of husband and wife. As they consider themselves to be the 'new women' who want to compete in the corporate world with men, they also demand for 'new men' who are ready to do the housework, which was in the past considered only a woman's job. This new phenomenon creates conflict in the patriarchal society which only expected women to stay at home and take care of the children. Her novels put the old norms and structures of marriage upside down with both women and men having to cope up with the new challenges facing marriage and family relationships in the contemporary world.

It is for this reason that Shobha De selected to write mainly with women characters that come from affluent backgrounds or women who have attained financial freedom. This selection of women from the corporate and higher economic strata as her characters demands a certain style of language.

She uses an extensive use of pun and irony as only the affluent urban people know to communicate as such. Their dialogues and conversations are about concerns which are determined by their class and fashion. There is an extensive usage of language that solicits to cultural fashion. They conduct themselves not as ordinary Indian women but as women who have broken the glass ceiling of patriarchy and economic dependency. Their language is full of satires about sexual affairs and the women characters use explicit sexual language and don't hide their libidinal desires. Shobha De's novels show that such a drastic change into the culture and morality of the society doesn't go without its problems. There are marital discords and societal alienations for deviant behaviors of women when they challenge the existing societal norms. The author writes in the *Criterion*:

Corporate women suffer from both sides without knowing how to react. If they give time for their career, they are charged of being a 'hardcore'. If they ask for some liberty in timing, they are accused of being too demanding by their bosses and if they give up their career to focus on their family, husband and children, they are wives hanging around at home and enjoying all the perks while contributing nothing to the family's income. Women accept that if they give up their job and concentrate on their family, they are openly criticized by their husbands and sometimes by their in-laws instead of being appreciated for their gratitude. (De, 29)

The voice of the writer in these novels is very important. Her stands are clear. She stands not only on the side of women emancipation but also stresses that women's sexual needs should be given priority than their marriage obligations. Her narrations and characters emphasize that marital relationships should be sacrificed for the sake of sexual freedom in favor of women. This throws the whole morality regarding fidelity and chastity values out of the window. It poses a new challenge to tradition of marriage, convention, morality and the entire culture of the society as well. Her emphasis on sexual promiscuity and libidinal desires of women in an explicit linguistic style in her novels makes her novels borderline soft porn type of fiction.

Therefore, the style of the writer resonates with her thematic concern that the woman should attain the freedom of being able to express herself sexually. The breaking of this taboo in the marriage convention creates conflicts and leads to marital discords and divorces. Her novels depict that women were enduring infidelity by their male counter parts in their marital relationships. But when the coin flips and it is the women who are engaged in extramarital affairs. The patriarchal norm feels challenged. As a result it becomes a huge source of conflict in the relationships and hinders women from achieving their sexual freedom in their married lives. Although her women characters are fearless, even when it comes to divorces and separations, and that they immediately start looking for new sexual partners, they don't seem to win over the society into accepting women's sexual freedom in marriage relationships. Raj Kumar Tharu writes:

Shobha De's blatant disregard for the norms of morality and decency present in the patriarchal social system

displays terrifying flippancy. In this regard, Sudhir Kumar his essay Artist as Vamp: A Feminist Approach to Starry Nights marks Shobha De as a soft-porn author. In *Starry Nights*¹⁸, the horrifying encounter between Aasha Rani and her uncle serves to reveal the facades of the male-centred and male-controlled value system. The female protagonist's opposition to victimhood and oppression is manifested through a variety of enduring ideological systems. Her heroines' way of life is likewise fraught with disappointment, mental breakdowns, and catastrophes. So while this vamp feminism is horrible in terms of aesthetics, it is undoubtedly beneficial economically. Most of the female protagonists of De's novel seem to have given high priority to economic strength as a milestone to fight deeply rooted patriarchy in society. (Tharu 10)

As a feminist woman writer in India, Shobha De has contributed a significant amount of literature in the form of novels. Due to the brazen and uncompromising nature of her language and style of writing, she has been known as a 'hardcore' feminist. Her depiction of women characters, especially her heroines is that of strong-headed women who won't succumb to patriarchy and male misogyny. However, the reader can clearly see that the issue of women emancipation and at the level which she was advocating for was a very difficult terrain for her to navigate. The society was not ready to accommodate such explicit sexuality and flamboyancy for women in marital relationships. As a result of her awareness that that issue was very difficult in such a culturally strict society, such as India, she confined her narrations and settings in urban centers and big corporate business communities.

Even though such a selection of a class of 'new women' community gave her writings such latitude of realism and credibility, it is still evident that the throwback from the societal conventions and moralities was not easy for her female characters. Many of her women characters end up having strong emotional, psychological, financial and spiritual problems. As a result of this her novels depict women with mental stress, anxiety, breakdown as well as sexually deranged personalities. Their fight to attain freedom for their sexual desires brings them an untold level of misery and conflict with their immediate environment. The conflict with the society and environment is stronger than conflicts with individual characters on a one on one basis. Therefore the society crashes their endeavors for sexual freedom as it is not yet ready for such changes in the established norms of the past. In her novel *Socialites Evenings*, Shoba De writes:

Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level...Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone...It is time they were made aware of their potential and power...It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that can lead to creative and dynamic harmony...Men will have to come to terms with women's power. (De 111-113).

In conclusion, the use of language and style in Shobha De's novels has to be seen in accordance with the themes of her

writings. This can be ascertained by looking into her individual novels and by reading her non-fictional articles on literature or interviews about her own works. An overall view from readers and critics about her novels is that her thematic concerns are culture and feminism. In terms of culture, she has written extensively in the novels discussed in this article and other works that she views the erosion of cultural traditions and values in contemporary times as a negative. At the same time she fights through her feminist themes for the absolute emancipation of women not only in financial terms but also in sexual aspects. The language and style of her writings therefore has to do mainly with these two recurring thematic concerns in her writings.

The most determinant factor of her linguistic and stylistic approach to her novels comes from her choice of female characters that are willing to fight societal stereotypes head on. In order to do that, she had to depend on women characters especially her heroines who are from affluent sectors of the society. These women have a rich business class background and are not financially dependent on men. Once their economic status is assured, she implied that the next step would be to challenge societal norms and moralities which don't suit them in their relationships in marriage. She uses explicit, unhinged, candid, brazen, and shocking language and action about issues the overall Indian culture is not accustomed to. As a result, the language and style she has used for her literature has been seen as an outrageously brave and ahead of its time in contemporary India.

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