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**SHOBHA DE: THE DOYENNE OF 'POPULAR CULTURE' IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

Literature has long been a vital part of society, and Indian women have significantly contributed to this field. Their remarkable achievements in literature are widely recognised and appreciated. Women, known for their creativity and artistic flair, have a profound connection with literature, which demands considerable artistic imagination. Indian women novelists, in particular, have added a fresh dimension to Indian English literature. This paper explores the evolving trends in Indian English writing, focusing specifically on Shobha De. It provides an in-depth analysis of her fiction, with particular attention to her incorporation of 'Popular Culture,' and highlights how her works diverge from other novelists in introducing this element into Indian English literature.

**Keywords:** *literature, women, artist, fiction, popular culture*

**INTRODUCTION**

Members of society generally recognise 'Popular Culture' (also known as 'pop culture') as a part of practices, beliefs, and objects that are dominant or ubiquitous in a society at a given time. It also encompasses the activities and feelings produced due to interaction with these dominant objects. This collection of ideas, heavily influenced in modern times by mass media, permeates people's daily lives in a given society. Thus, popular culture influences an individual's attitudes towards certain topics (McGaha, 2007). However, there are numerous ways to define it.

Scholars trace the rise of popular culture back to the emergence of the middle class during the Industrial Revolution. As people transitioned from traditional farming communities to urban working-class lives, they began developing their own distinct culture to share with fellow workers, marking a shift from the influence of their parents and employers.

Following World War II, advancements in mass media spurred significant cultural and social transformations in the West. Concurrently, capitalism's focus on profit generation led to marketing newly invented products to various social classes. Consequently, the concept of popular culture began to intertwine with mass culture, consumer culture, image culture, media culture, and the culture produced by manufacturers for widespread consumption.

Moreover, because of this, popular culture is considered an empty conceptual category or something that can be defined in different contradictory ways by different people across different contexts. It is generally defined in contrast to other forms of culture, or high culture, and also through different theoretical perspectives such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-modernism, and many more. The most common pop culture categories are – entertainment (such as movies, music, television, and video games), sports, news, politics, fashion/ clothes, technology, and slang.

Sometimes, many people view 'popular culture' as trivial and doom it down to find consensual acceptance from (or attract attention amongst) the mainstream. Consequently, it comes under heavy criticism from different non-mainstream sources (most remarkably from religious and counter-cultural groups), which deem it superficial, consumerist, sensationalist, or corrupt.

Historically, 'popular culture' in English goes back to the Fifteenth century in law and politics, meaning low, base, vulgar, and of the common people. The idea of 'popular culture,' as it is known today, came into existence and got great acclaim in the second half of the Nineteenth century in English Literature and American Literature as well, as it was the

desire of the penmen from the times past to write what the society was interested in and what the society was doing. Popular fiction was the mixture of these desires and customs of society. For the first fifty years, it was viewed negatively, but by the end of the century, it started gaining positive connotations. Mathew Arnold's book *Culture and Anarchy* highlighted the idea that culture was divisible into various types, mainly – High, Popular and Folk. That a quavering debate between conscientious, serious literary fiction and a sizzling scandalous popular fiction has existed since time immemorial to draw a clear line of demarcation between a literary piece of art and a figment of popular fiction is easier said than done. Until 1988, 'popular culture' was mainly foreign to English literature readers from the Indian subcontinent. However, the publication of *Socialite Evenings* in 1988 by Shobha De, 'the Jackie Collins of India' (Fineman, 1992) or 'The Maharani of Muck' (Kennedy, 2004), paved the way for a new era in Indian English Literature known as 'Popular Culture.'

Shobhaa De, a prominent Indian author and columnist, is widely recognised for her incisive portrayal of contemporary Indian society, particularly through the lens of popular culture. Her works often explore themes of glamour, celebrity, and the complexities of modern urban life, providing a rich tapestry of insights into the cultural dynamics of India. This literature review examines various scholarly analyses and critiques of De's representation of pop culture across her fictional works.

In her article "Rise and Fall of a Star: A Study of *Starry Nights*," Geeta Barua portrays Shobhaa De's long association with Bombay stardom. Aasha Rani, the female protagonist of *Starry Nights*, falls in love with Akshay Arora, a married man who finally betrays her. Geeta Barua also sheds light on Aasha Rani's first lesbian experience with Linda. Aasha also enjoys a loquacious affair with another married person, Abhijit, living with his wife and family. Eventually, Aasha gets married to Jamie Phillips in New Zealand, lives happily with him, and gives birth to her daughter, Sasha. However, after her return to India, she also has an extramarital affair with Jojo, resulting in betrayal. Barua's article explores the rise and fall of a shining film star who never left the dazzling world of the Bombay film industry (Barua, 1995).

Jaydipsinh Dodiya, in his book *The Fiction of Shobhaa De: Critical Studies*, pioneeringly explores Shobhaa De's fictional world and presents her as a shrewd judge of people. He vividly portrays the cosmopolitan society of contemporary India, and she also portrays contemporary reality more distinctively. With frank narration and absolute open-heartedness, she portrays men as negative players in some of her novels (Dodiya, 2000).

S. P. Swain, in his article "Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings*: A Feminist Study," presents De's views of women as not only passively bold but also powerful. De's women represent the overwhelming materialism and the lack of incorporeality engraving the modern age. Karuna, the central female character of *Socialite Evenings*, denounces her husband's uncomplimentary nature, his duplicity and crookedness (Swain, 2002).

Sangita Yadav's article "The New Woman in Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings*" revolves around De's powerful women controlling the male psyche. De's women are overly sensitive to emotions and thoughts and crave economic independence. Karuna and Anjali are socialites who possess independent thoughts to meet their goals (Yadav, 2005).

R. S. Pathak, in his article "Feminist Concerns in Shobhaa De's Work: A Study in Attitudes," conveys the emotionally stimulated excitement in De's novels. Young people in India have incomparable importance to the institution of marriage. De's women give more importance to money, pooh-poohing the ideas of respectability associated with marriage. They break all sexual taboos with zestfulness (Pathak, 2011).

In the article "Artist as Vamp: A Feminist Approach in *Starry Nights*," Sudhir Kumar presents Shobhaa De as a soft porn novelist. He finds De flaunting a frightening flippancy, fragrantly flouting the traditional morality and decency prevalent in Indian patriarchal society. De, in *Starry Nights*, presents a vivid picture of Aasha Rani's terrifying experience

with her uncle exhibiting the pretence of a societal value system dominated and controlled by men. However, De's heroine, Aasha Rani, dissents with massive oppression and victimisation carried through several venerable ideological constructs manifested in Indian history, philosophy, culture and arts. Aasha Rani chooses a glamorous life, though full of frustration, mental breakdown and disaster (Kumar, 1995).

T. Sarada, in her article titled "Women in Shobhaa De: A Feminist Perspective," mentions Shobhaa De presenting her women occupying primary, secondary and tertiary roles in her fiction. Approaching life practically, these women break the marital bond and lead a life outside the marital relationship. De's women show individual awareness in their efforts to raise the consciousness of a patriarchal culture (Sarada, 2002).

Presenting Shobhaa De's frankness, Subhash Chandra, in his article "Family and Marriage in *Socialite Evenings*," finds De's new definition of marriage as a complete postulation of sexual freedom without marital fidelity. Owing to chicanery as the basis of marriage, Anjali, a pervert socialite, marries Abbas Tyabjee, a womaniser. However, she also enjoys extramarital affairs and suffers the consequences of a divorce. Karuna, the female protagonist of *Socialite Evenings*, discards her marital bond in her pursuit of finding space, assertion and becoming a self-sufficient woman (Chandra, 1991).

Neelam Tikka, in her article "Lesbian Relationship in *Strange Obsession*," explicates lesbianism. She mentions Shobhaa De's portrayal of the obsession of a lesbian, Minx. Owing to an Electra complex, Minx is transformed into a lesbian and develops a hatred for her father. The novel portrays women suffering from the deception of men (Tikka, 2000).

Shashi Kant Gupta, in his book *Indian Ethos in Shobhaa De's Work*, sheds light on the apparent glossy life of a permissive cosmopolitan Indian society. However, De also emphasises the importance of family and marital fidelity. Being a feminist-humanist novelist, De focuses on urban women's problems and advises them to be self-reliant and independent by educating themselves and becoming economically independent (Gupta, 2010).

Shobhaa De's exploration of pop culture in her fictional works reveals the complexities of modern Indian society. Through her incisive narratives, she highlights the intersections of celebrity, consumerism, gender, and urban life. By situating her characters within the dynamic cultural landscape of contemporary India, De not only entertains but also provokes critical reflection on the socio-cultural issues facing her society. As scholarly discourse continues to evolve, De's contributions remain vital for understanding the intricate relationship between literature and popular culture in a rapidly changing world.

The paper aims to critically evaluate Shobhaa De's achievements as a central character in Indian English literature, examining her influence in forming and defining 'pop culture' through her literary works. Thus, this study tries to analyse her narrative style, thematic elements, and cultural criticism in her writings, along with her impact on modern discussions around gender, sexuality, and urban life in India, and to compare her works with those of other Indian and foreign authors. The purpose also encompasses analysing how De's depiction of contemporary Indian life reflects and contests societal standards, thereby positioning her as a pivotal figure in the progression of Indian English literature.

De's distinctive style and narrative technique have shaped a generation of authors. Comprehending her influence can yield insights into the development of Indian English literature, especially its interplay with popular culture. The research will investigate De's contribution to contesting conventional gender norms and stereotypes. Her depiction of women's experiences provides a critical viewpoint on feminism in India, enhancing broader dialogues around gender equality and representation.

## **METHOD**

This research seeks to elucidate Shobhaa De's literary influence and position as a cultural icon in Indian society.

Academic journals, books, and critical articles examining De's narratives, themes, and influence on modern Indian writing have been analysed to construct a theoretical framework, assess her impact on Indian English literature, and explore the notion of 'pop culture.' The researcher has closely read Shobhaa De's five novels, situating her works within the socio-political and cultural context of India in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This analysis emphasises her narrative style, themes, and character development while identifying recurring motifs associated with pop culture, such as consumerism, urban life, and gender dynamics, influenced by globalisation, the emergence of the middle class, and the changing role of women in society.

Moreover, this paper also compares Shobhaa De's works with those of other Indian and foreign authors to underscore her distinctive contributions to pop culture in literature. It uses cultural criticism to analyse how De's works reflect and critique societal norms and trends.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The heroines in De's novels rebuild their lost fortune and make all efforts to look gorgeous and glamorous by losing weight and spending money in beauty and massage parlours. They try to look and act differently from their stereotypical, conventional and traditional female counterparts. They love to fall in love with their looks by which they try to attract people. It gives them much pleasure when people fall head to hill in love with them and are least concerned about it. Shobha De does not believe in portraying her female characters as loving enslaved people or mere help mates at home. As a writer, she tries to mirror her feminist bent of mind while characterising women in her novels. A broader evaluation of her works reveals her protest against the good old image of women who cannot live how they want to and do things the way they want to. Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers termed 'New Woman.' These new women are much more physically active and athletically strong than their mothers.

Shobha De's heroines, be it Karuna, Aparna, Mikki, Alisha, or Asha Rani, are rebellious modern Indian women who challenge the orthodoxy of social taboos. They are different from the sexually ignorant Indian women, which is quite contradictory to most Indian male writers who feel that sex is an unpleasant subjection to man's desire – necessary in order to have offspring. De's women challenge this traditional setup in society. They are far more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison to men. They are not submissive and are guilty of their affairs. Sujata, in *Sultry Days* (1994), is a prostitute who does what her mind says, and this gives her pleasure. She defines life on her own terms. When Asha Rani, the famous heroine of Bollywood in *Starry Nights* (1991), decides to quit films all of a sudden when being at the peak of her career to live with a fellow co-star, Akshay Arora, her mother tries to dissuade her from doing it. However, she argues, "Money, money, money. That's all you think of. Well, I am fed up being your money machine. I have done for everybody- you, Sudha and others- now I want to live for myself" (De, 1991). Asha Rani designs a code of conduct for herself, free from the prescribed gender rules and sexual constraints. This indicates that women in De's novels cannot always be taken for granted that they will be dutiful and self-sacrificing daughters to their parents. They will certainly revolt when their self-interest is at stake. They may come across hurdles, but they are smart enough to ignore them and break these hurdles very skillfully and tactfully and come out of it comfortably.

Women in the higher echelons of society are primarily concerned with public perception. The notion of morality stemming from affection for a singular individual is deemed obsolete. The women in Shobha De's novels advocate for liberation from traditional norms by engaging in pre-marital relationships rather than extramarital ones. De delves deeply into the sentiments of free upper-class women in contemporary Indian society.

Sexuality and sensuality are integral to existence, and to embrace life, one must acknowledge sensuality. A woman does not regard fidelity and affection as virtues when

pursuing pleasure. Here, De portrays women in their authentic essence. They are depicted as their true selves rather than as idealised versions of themselves. Consequently, the concept of genuine pleasure has been interpreted variably among individuals. For some ladies, it may signify erotic intercourse; however, for Mikki and her husband, Binny Malhotra, it may represent tender and passionate lovemaking on a moonlit night in his castle before their marriage.

In the novel *Sisters* (1992), Shobha De mentions that women can make men give them what they want. For example, in the following lines, she talks about the joy that a newly wedded wife should feel when she is with her husband: "...His expertise and imagination were boundless as he excited her in a hundred different ways, touching, licking, nibbling, sucking... he turned her over, he stood her up, he had her on all fours, and he even had her upside down with blood rushing in a gush into her head. It was unreal, pleasurable, but also a little frightening" (De, 1992). Shobha De has mentioned that a woman can get pleasure even when she is surrendering to a man against her wishes. She enjoys her protests like the following description in *Sisters* (1992): "Mikki didn't have time to do anything but savour the myriad physical sensations sweeping over her pliant body as she surrendered to this man who was now her husband. There was no resistance left. And she was happy. And they had broken all the rules and every taboo that she had ever known. She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon" (De, 1992).

De's heroines are not ready to abide by the superficiality of social rules made by men. De's women dare to move around and seek pleasure with anyone they like to get rid of their mental fatigue. The general norm slated by society for a woman is to show herself as an active participant in the sexual alliance. She has been taught not to exhibit her sexual appetite and to participate boldly in sensual activities. Under this servile situation, she does not have to express her sexual urges. However, De's women frame their own culture by breaking these social norms. While writing about women, Shobha De does not have to be unrealistic because without involving herself completely in writing her novels and portraying her women as different characters, she could not have realised this. Her heroines have found various ways of seeking pleasure and do not hesitate to design their own attitudes and behaviour, which may vary from their counterparts. They are mostly urban women who emphasise morality and spirituality less or less. They want to remain free from established gender roles and sexual constraints of the traditional society. They want to enjoy the same rights as men. Men regard their women as commodities that can be bought or sold on their terms and conditions, make women dance to their tunes, mould them in the concept of traditional servility and make them stand meekly and suffer emotionally. Thus, women are made to suffer and strive hard to discover the human in them.

Sex contributes immensely to pleasuring the women in De's novels. The novelist feels that sex should not be despised or something to be afraid of. She speaks about sex in the following way in *Snapshots* (1995), "Sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three-letter word in India, is enough to celebrate" (De, 1995). She further adds, "We don't dismiss it. We don't find it dirty. Sex doesn't threaten us. I'm not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, and chastity. It's pathetic" (De, 1995). In the urban world, a modern woman tries to do anything that comes to her mind and goes to any extent to derive her own pleasure. The best example can be found in the novel *Starry Nights*, where the heartthrob of millions, the queen of Bollywood, Asha Rani, tries to derive pleasure in destroying men, and the most dreaded weapon she uses is 'Bed'. Men are unable to forget her once she goes to bed with them. Her bedmates ranged from Kishen Bhai to Akshay Arora to Abhijit, Jay to Jojo, and she even succeeded in seducing her father's friend in a plane. Sometimes, men got afraid of her spell, yet they could not resist going to her for pleasure, and once they went, they were trapped. Asha Rani loved to destroy them. According to her, the bed can be considered a battlefield where the battle goes between the two human bodies.

In her 1996 novel *Second Thoughts*, Shobha De asserts that a woman, diminished to a mere physical being and subjected to mental torment by her husband, forfeits her right to ruin her own life. She enriched her heroine by introducing a partner who could infuse her life with joy and provide the pleasure she ardently sought. Maya was an attractive young woman from Kolkata who relocated to Bombay after marrying Ranjan, a bank executive. Ranjan had no interest in her as a woman and had never shown concern for her interests. He never sought to ascertain the cause of Maya's melancholy. He believed that supplying four substantial meals was sufficient for her and that she should express gratitude for his efforts on her behalf. Despite Maya's advances in bed, he rebuffed her by stating that he required time for it. Nikhil's arrival imparted a novel significance to Maya's existence. He was a college student residing on the fourth floor. Although he may lack interest in academics, he has perfected the skill of enchanting ladies. Maya instantly perceived the impact Nikhil had on her life.

After he remarked that she appeared fresh and attractive in a blue sari, she increasingly wore blue saris. His presence alone elicited joy that originated from the heart. She began to attend to her makeup, donned fresh saris, groomed her hair, and meticulously applied sindoor (vermillion) at the parting of her forehead, striving to seem lovely each day in anticipation of his arrival. She was astonished during their initial meeting when he attempted to gaze into her eyes and smiled. She says, "But Nikhil most definitely affected me, and one part of me didn't 'approve.' This was ridiculous – a newly married woman daydreaming about a neighbour's young son" (De, 1996).

The pangs of conscience yield to this story's magnificent impulses of the mind. Extramarital affairs are perceived with greater tolerance and leniency. If a woman derives pleasure from it, she readily indulges in it. She perceives it as a ventilator that delivers life-sustaining air to a spirit suffocating in an adverse environment, referred to as fate. Maya is acutely cognisant that Nikhil is the other man in her life. She is aware that accepting his offer of friendship would constitute a breach of social and moral codes. While Ranjan, her husband, was on a ten-day official tour, Maya seized the chance to accompany Nikhil on an outing to Malabar Hills on his motorbike. She permitted herself to experience delight and affection in the presence of Nikhil, where she perceived the beauty and pleasure in her existence. She acknowledges in this manner: "I was ready to jump on Nikhil's motorbike and say 'goodbye' to my uninspiring life without the slightest regret. The choice was frighteningly mine" (De, 1996).

The intimate scene shown by Shobha De between Maya and Nikhil is characterised as the pinnacle of pleasure experienced by Maya. It was characterised as seamless, mild, and devoid of discomfort. One day, Nikhil arrived at her residence and proclaimed it was his birthday. Without allowing Maya an opportunity to respond, he embraced her. The author subsequently elaborates on the ensuing events in detail: "But Nikhil's mouth covered mine gently. His eyes were shut and his hands were in my untidy hair with the bouquet getting caught in the tangles" (De, 1996). Maya characterises the kiss with Nikhil as utterly complete and very focused: "It was a kiss that involved Nikhil's entire being. A kiss so focused, so complete. I surrendered to its soft urgency even though my mind was on mundanities like the washerwoman showing up earlier than usual" (De, 1996). Maya has characterised these moments as the most extraordinary, inconceivable, and poignant experiences of her life.

### **Comparative Study**

Shobha De is not the only author to be ridiculed for her forthright and candid depiction of sex. Some other novelists like Khushwant Singh and Sasthi Brata have also been criticised for the same. Mulk Raj Anand was also charged with the use of vulgar and obscene language in his fiction as well. Even in Western literature, several reputed authors like D.H. Lawrence and Philip Roth, though patently recognised as indecent, have not been discarded

for literary studies. Charles Dickens, whose novels made him the most popular British writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still very popular, was also charged with vulgarity in his writings. Hence, the objections against De's fiction being erotic or obscene do not have any serious basis. They seem to result from a narrow and partial understanding of critical stance.

What appears to be sexual perversions is their sincere endeavour to come to terms with the absurdity of their situation, the reality of the society in the urban world. De's attitude and narrative attitude can be seen in the endings of her novels. All the characters who lead the uninhibited, immoral lives of the rich industrialists, starlets, and social prowlers either finally disappear from the scene or repent and lament such a life. The woman character, in particular, may seem violent and uncontrollable yet ultimately become domesticated and fatigued, turning to ordinary settled family life. The recurring theme of the search for inner happiness and the presentation of the unhappy life of the people populating De's world makes her position clear. Not even a single couple who denies the social norms leads a normal life in her novels. Through this vulgarity, De has mocked the society ladies, their behaviours and thoughts. She is aware of the frailties and frivolous concerns of this life. Her narratives are a way to let these women know their actual stand in society. It is a means to make them aware of the limitations to be followed or ignored.

## CONCLUSION

A charismatic yet revolutionary fighter for women's rights, liberation, and freedom, Shobhaa De is the first to explore the world of Indian urban women. She is a prominent figure in Indian English literature, representing the dynamic convergence of literature and popular culture. Her capacity to analyse and evaluate contemporary society through her writings has influenced public conversation and changed the author's function in modern India. By audaciously confronting themes of gender, relationships, and urban existence, De has established a distinctive narrative style that appeals to a varied audience. As a prominent figure in pop culture, her influence transcends literature, establishing her as a vital cultural icon whose work perpetually inspires and confronts established standards. Her novels, focusing on diverse issues of women, voice against the traditional Indian patriarchal culture of treating women as appendages to men and represent the voice of new Indian women. Shobhaa De strongly believes in a frank and open narration of the incidents. Women in her novels are go-getters, lustful, power-hungry, and bold. They indulge in free sex and prefer to live a fashionable and wealthy life. They are more prone to personal freedom and glamorous life. De has endeavoured to reveal the societal and spiritual disintegration, which she perceives as being in a state of despair. Consequently, she has endeavoured to comprehend human psychology, prompting her to examine the longstanding traditions that inhibit a woman from pursuing her preferred activities due to the stringent constraints imposed upon her.

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