



# The Creative Launcher

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## **Picaresque Elements in *Starry Nights***

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### **Abstract**

Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights* contains many picaresque features. A picaresque novel deals with the typical story of a 'picaro'- that is Spanish word for 'rogue' or 'rascal' who lives by his own wits and shows little of any alteration of character through the long succession of his adventures. Picaresque narrative is realistic in manners, episodic in structure, and usually satiric in aim. In other words, a picaresque novel deals with the adventures of rogues and vagabonds. The picaro is a clever and amusing adventurer of low- social class who makes his way by tricks and roguery rather than by honorable industry. Then he/she does some adventure, he /she begins with petty menial tasks such as performed by household servants and valets. His /her immoral rascality is hairbreadth sort of actual criminality and offence.

**Keywords:** Picaresque, Hypocrisy, Adventures, Rascality, Criminality, Episodic

Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights* has nearly all the picaresque features. Commenting on Shobhaa De's novels R. S. Pathak, a critic in his "Feminist concerns in Shobhaa De's works" says, "her novels seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. The 'picaro' in this case is a woman but she is avid of experience, in search of which she goes from place to place. The picaro is not always a male character as generally held but it may be a girl or a woman as Pamela in Richardson's *Pamela*, or *Virtue Rewarded* (1740). In the *Starry Nights* we witness Aasha Rani the heroine of the novel in the capacity of a picaro. She herself says "I am nothing but an unwanted, bastard child. For everyone to exploit." The main characteristics of a picaresque novel are as under-

1. It is essentially a novel of adventure.
2. The hero belongs to a low social class.
3. The plot of the novel is episodic.
4. The novel is the picture gallery of the society of the age.
5. The hero is provided with the opportunity of satirizing corruption and hypocrisy of the age.
6. There is an ironic survey of morals and manners of the society in the novel.



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Undoubtedly, in *Starry Nights* Shobhaa De has satirically portrayed the character of Aasha Rani, the protagonist of the novel with all her adventures right from the very beginning to the very end of the novel. It is Aasha Rani around whom the sequence of the episodes revolves thus, supplying episodic unity to the novel. There is hardly any chapter in the novel where Aasha Rani does not appear. She covers nearly all the pages of the novel and helps in the development of the plot. Like other rogues, Aasha Rani is also an abandoned girl who lives in slums (characteristic of low-social class life style) with her mother who was deserted by her drunkard and bankrupt father Appa. She has to undergo so many trials and tribulations in her journey to become a famous 'Bollywood' actor. For this, she has to 'please' many middlemen of the likes Kishen Bhai, Gopal, Amar and Seth Amirchand etc. Even her mother, her father and her sister Sudha Rani to some extent, could be held responsible for her plight. Her mother who was a 'scheming' lady put her on sale for directors, actors, producers, photographers and film financiers so that they may be 'pleased' by her daughter and in its exchange may gate some money to run her family and household in the city of Madras. She falls prey to many exploiters but returns as a transformed girl.

It is evident that Aasha Rani could not fulfill her dreams instead, she wanders from one place to another, sleeps with so many scoundrels in hope of getting their favours. The heroine Aasha Rani being fed up with Bombay film industry secretly elopes with Abhijit Mehra, a businessman to New Zealand. They spend a great time in each other's company there. They also enjoy their holidays there. But in the meantime she is left alone in a foreign country with no friends by Abhijit who was forced by his father to return India. Her immoral life does not stop here but starts her life afresh. This time she meets a Kiwi Jamie Phillips (Jay) in a disco. After a short romance, she marries with Jay and gives birth to a daughter Sasha. This marriage also did not long last as Jay was flirting with some other girl. She broke the marriage and has an affair with another person Gopal Krishna, an arms dealer. It is in London that she meets Shonali, a socialite and call girl who entertains London High society people. Aasha Rani is here trapped by her as a murderer but she escapes anyhow. Thus it is evident that she sometimes works in the film industry of her own country, sometimes in Newzealand, sometimes in England- to say from one continent to another performing various roles at various places attributing to a salient feature of the picaresque novel.

The novel, *Starry Nights* is completely picturizing the society of the age in which it is cast. The Bombay film industry with its studios, streets, theatres, five star hotels where premiers are often held production companies of the films dressing rooms glittering showroom, jeweller's shops etc. It also provides a Kaleidoscope of people like pimps, directors, money-lenders (financiers), directors who always wanted their due whether by fair or foul means. They are shown 'hounding' the innocents like Aasha Rani and other budding actors of the 'Bollywood'. It also denounces the high- ups and their society, their lifestyles and their double standards. Take the example of Linda. She is a Journalist who works for a



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film magazine *Showbiz* and interviews the actors, director and film critics for their views. Ironically she behaves at her lowest as she engages Aasha Rani in and unnatural sexual act which shatters all the paradigm of Journalism and tears the image of a Journalist in our society. Seth Amirchand, a politician, is another hypocritical character who is very shadowy in nature. He said, “I hate politics but I am forced into it by the love of my people...” Actually he projected himself as an ideal Gandhivadi leader wearing a white Gandhi cap on his head but contrary, he is a gangster and runs a realty firm with the help of his pet goons. Furthermore, he is also a big womanizer who exploits even young girls including Aasha Rani. He has many ‘rakhails’ like Lubana Beghum and many others. In this way, the whole society has been precisely delineated by the novelist by exposing the hypocrisy and immorality in which the people are engrossed. It is really a vivid portrayal.

Like in the picaresque novels, in *Starry Nights*, too the heroine Aasha Rani has become a strong tool in the hands of the novelist to satirise and mock the corruption, villainy, backbiting and debauchery of the society. Right from the very beginning, her mother Amma also does not fulfill her duties as mother. She should have drawn her towards an ideal profession, she should have properly guided her as a real mother but she instead, pushes her in a ‘hell’ where she has sunk into vices. Not only this she also searches her ‘new customers’ to promote her as heroine. Thus, it can be said that the novel has candidly satirized Amma’s character and dissected her persona for audience to frame their views. Likewise, every person (directors, producers etc.) in ‘Bollywood’ have been shown in their real garb. All the people have been ironically portrayed to serve as strong tool of reformation and to aware the newcomers from the rampant corruption in society and workplaces. However, the novelist’s attitude towards their vices, is reformative. She appeals the readers not to encourage these malpractices but to raise voice against them. The novel ironically surveys the morals and manners of the society with a view to correct the wrong doers.

Thus, it can be asserted that more or less *Starry Nights* is modeled on the picaresque structure in which the heroine leads an adventurous life like any rogue in the guise of a bastard slum girl, a prostitute, a wife, a mother and a call-girl that entertains the London lover society and finally as a devoted daughter with a zeal to resurrect the dreams of her bed-ridden father, Appa.

## References

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