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Recommended Citation

Singh, S. & Singh, P. Shobha De' Deconstructed for Maverick Feminism, 96-111. In Indu Swami (Ed.), Contemporary Indian Women Novelists In English. Sarup & Sons: Delhi.

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Shobha De': Deconstructed for *Maverick* Feminism

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Shobha De' has been typecast into the genre of pulp fiction writers by some, as her work does not quite seem to belong to the category of literary work. On the other hand, there does appear a feministic orientation in her work that makes women more visible in the *bedroom* unlike traditional or literary works. This paper aims to raise and address a question - Does De's writing lend itself to explorations of the radical and poststructuralist themes? In keeping with the latter premise, her writing, characterization of women, and their relationships, particularly the constructions of sexuality, does portray women on the crossroads of numerous intersectionalities including those of capitalism, market, global, metro, urban, *classist*, *materialistic,* and disorganized urban India. This paper explores works of Shobha De' to deliberate upon her portrayal of women and deconstruct it's meaning using the interpretation of Derrida's work and *maverick* feminism offered by Holmes & Cilliers (1997). Using the techniques of deconstruction to examine the underlying textual ambiguity and the writer's approach informed by poststructuralist feminism, this paper examines the meaning of urban womanhood produced in the writings of Shobha De'.

The Art of Deconstruction

The positivistic approach to learning limits interpretation of word and thought by expecting a good fit between the structures of society and the identity of the individual within these structures (Singh, 2007). Approaches such as critical theory, post modernism, and post structuralism allow the contravention of this and do away with claims of *representing truths,* instead they focus on the limitations of attempting a universally true and temporally lasting representation (Agger, 1991). The method of deconstruction stems from poststructuralist thought; a "critique frequently leveled against deconstruction is that it is an intellectual game which pays little or no attention to political struggles. This critique varies in its intensity and rigour: deconstruction is either rejected in toto as an ivory tower activity, or it is partly applauded for walking an intellectual tight-rope, but still seen as lacking serious political applicability " (Holms & Cilliers 377). Deconstruction is a process of questioning and highlighting "the instability of textual logic", as used by Derrida (Schott 158). Holms & Cilliers identify a commonality between feminism and deconstruction, which is use of the same institutions and concepts to explain a standpoint as the ones being criticized. Thus, "the challenge which both feminism and deconstruction encounter centre around the position from where critique can be levered: how must one positions oneself in the face of 'phallogocentric' institutions; from what position(s) or platform(s) can deconstructive (feminist) critique be made and, related to this, what is the status of women, of men and of the subject in the space of the 'beyond'?" (482).

Derrida's conceptualization includes two kinds of feminisms: The *reactive* is "…the dream of emancipation, reappropriation and mastery is enforced and appropriated for 'women's struggles'"; and the *maverick* is "…one that claims ... to speak out in the name of revolution' and to think another space, a beyond characterized by 'paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities' and 'absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard of and incalculable sexual differences' (1982: 68)" (as cited in Holms & Cilliers 412). It is in a sense of maverick feminism that would be outside the known and accepted parameters of social systems and their values that De's heroines can claim the realm of feminist agency. That the women who are the heroines of De's texts are feminine is undeniable; they remain unbound by social conventionalities, and perform agency because they want to, irrespective of social acceptance. They remain true to the ethos of the feminine, as visible in their comfortable sexuality. Drawing from "Derrida's interpretation of Nietzsche's texts," Holms & Cilliers say "the woman of the third 'position' (who does not, strictly speaking, belong to any one position), plays on the very boundaries of signification, and thereby reveals the limits of symbolic exchange: ...

the question (what is property, what is appropriation, expropriation, mastery, servitude, etc), is no longer possible" (387). It is possible then to look for feminist motivations in De's work and writing in *Hinglish*, and grasp its meaningfulness for its audience that extends beyond the immediate titillation of the senses and a brief temporal stimulation.

Methods

For the writing of this paper, we discussed De's work in an informal focus group setting with 8 immigrant women from India and Pakistan who have been living in Chicago, USA for the last 15-20 years[1]. They were 35 to 45 years of age, with college degrees, and from the higher middle class. Most of the women were primarily homemakers not employed outside the house. However, two of the women held professional degrees and were employed outside their homes. The women in this group have probably lived in versions of both disparate worlds portrayed by De in her books. The discussion was useful in forming alternative meaning and interpretation of the authors' intentions. The multiplicity of voices adds to the process of deconstruction and further enables the exploration of textual ambiguity in De's works.

Shobha De': The person.

Shobha De is what is referred to as a celebrity in *modernspeak*. As famous for her private life as she is for her work, much has been written about Shobha De' and even more has been implied. From her ordinary, middle class roots to her 'Page 3' celebrity status; she has built a world surrounded with clichés both in her books and her life. Her

[1] We want to thank Nandita, Seema S, Seema A, Nimra, Bushra, Asha, Meenakshi, Sridevi, and Sunaina for their engaging and involved discussion.

genre of “pulp fiction” has been denied the qualification of “literary”, but many have read her and her books always make it to the Indian Best Seller list (Dugger, 1998).

Shobha De’: The author of gossip columns.

This is how De’s genesis into writing is derisively traced. Frequent criticisms of De’s work include the use of *sex* to shock readers and gain popularity for her work, clichéd plotting, undercurrents of reality, little investment in character development, and frequent use of ‘Hinglish’. The epithet of ‘Jackie Collins’ of India is also a popular reference to her work. Is it appropriate to say that Shobha De’s novels are unreal and superficial? Is Shobha De’s work founded on the essentials of pulp fiction writing: a standard formula, a predictable storyline, some sleaze and sex? Or is it fair to explore the undercurrent of realism reflected in the superficiality of middle class values and their desperate aspirations to emulate the rich and the privileged? Does Shobha De’s writing also have those elements of inspiration from her personal life, which make her writing not the silliness of pseudo-experiences, but a statement on the kind of experiences she imagines people who are famous have? To decipher the underlying text of Shobha De’s work, it is important to explore the author as a person, as it influences her work, including her middle class roots and the exposition of middle class values reflected in her books.

The ‘Heroine’ of Shobha De’s Novels.

A ‘girl’ from a ‘traditional’ Indian household, who manages to find her way to ‘Bombay or Mumbai’, is a prototype primary character of De’s book. She is ‘attractive’, even beautiful, and easily stands out with her physical looks and is obviously ‘intelligent’. Her psychology is traced to a craving for the *upscale living* and the world of riches and glamour that is always populated by industrialists, Bollywood actors, and people like her- the heroine who is an aspirant to this rich and glamorous world. In 1960s and 70s, when most of India did not have the easy access to the world behind the scene of cinema and glamour, newspapers and magazines were the primary source of information on this topic. Stories about celebrities, their illicit relationships, *casting couch*, and glamorous gatherings trickled via magazines like the *Stardust*; A far cry from today when Twitter, Facebook, and blogging, along with cable television and intrusive print media provide a running commentary on the lifestyles of Bollywood and other celebrities. De' grew up when people could only fantasize about Bollywood and other celebrities' lives while dealing with their own stressful and routine lives in a socialist Indian economy. Girls and women from the lower and middle class families dreamt about stepping out and violating the '*Lakshman Rekha*' of middle class morality and its traditional boundary of customs and norms, and centuries of proscriptions on right and righteous roles and responsibilities that a woman must play on her journey from a child to womanhood.

The roles essayed by Shobha De's female characters do not typically fall into any one of these categories, but at the same time they do not stand in opposition to them. She manages to convey the righteousness as both sophisticated and unsophisticated. The stories of Shobha De' expose the underbelly of Bollywood, of the rich and the famous, and yet conveys adulation for the same. The movies of the Bollywood of yesteryear were focused on maintaining the myth of the *model values of Indianness,* because of the underlying perceptions that any thing different would not be palatable to the Indian public that frequented the cinema (Munshi, 2001). Thus the strangeness of actors, actresses, and models, who were being frequently embroiled in scandals and gossip contrary to the very images of morality they essayed in the public appearances, was always an attention grabber. Shobha De' was aware of the merit of this formula and as a film journalist had easy access to true stories and gossip. An argument can be made about De's opportunism, her conflict, her dissent, her role as a social documenter, or a mix of all or any of these ideographic portrayals in discussing De's work and the underlying motivations for her work as a novelist.

Central Themes of De's Books.

De's novels always have a female protagonist as a central character, an initially unhappy woman, dissatisfied with her current situations, from a typical middle class Indian (Hindu) family. The female remains enamored by the glamour of Bollywood, modeling, and lifestyles of the rich and famous. She takes steps, often against the wishes of her immediate family, to enter this group using all the resources that she has at her disposal, including looks and intelligence, and some manipulation and deliberate choices. Once the protagonist is a part of that group and is exposed to the inner workings of the group and its people and their issues, she experiences a loss of faith and of confidence, and eventually a conflict. Though no element of this process and transition in the protagonists' life is explored in depth, it is mentioned sometimes by actually stating that the woman character is experiencing these emotions. At some point in the story she seeks out her family and reevaluates her strengths and those of her original support system. A victim of their own ambitions and greed, the female protagonists search for stability in the new insecure world of glamour, yet is never sure if she has attained it.

Starting from her first book, "Socialite Evenings", women weave through a myriad of relationships before ultimately finding the courage to embrace their own identity. During this journey they meet and admire and are inspired by women and men who seem to have it – money, richness, social circle, men – but not love and stability.

The context of her books can be summarized in a few primary themes. The interpretation of class, as viewed through relationships of Bombay elites, Bollywood celebrities, and the business class is the first. Sex and man-woman relationships are the second, hovering around consensual sex, abuse, and incest. Unfortunately, this theme could have been developed into one of violence and victimization but it never really extends beyond a superficial reverential note. Gossip, scandal, and *newsy* is the third theme that implies and instigates underlying and unpleasant contexts and dynamics, like celebrity hook ups and breakups, casting couch, extra marital affairs, and lesbian relationships, but does not really spell it out.

De's Opportunism.

De's life is a study in intelligent, motivated, opportunistic, urban, middle class womanhood. Starting out as a 20-year-old model, gossip columnist in journalism, then editor of a film magazine, marrying rich the second time around, and on to being a successful novelist whose books initially sold for their sexually explicit imagery, a rarity in the 1990s. Fifteen books down and a certain celebrity status to her credit, the women in her books seem to emulate the ups and downs of a career woman whose work brings her into the limelight. The experiences of women as depicted in her books, of abuse, casting couches, and sexual ambiguity, could be informed by truths. Since De had proximity to gossip and scandals, and her initial success in the world of film journalism was owed to some form of writing as a gossip columnist, the commercial returns for 'shocking' the 'traditional' *Indian society* by providing gratifyingly controversial and salacious details of lives must have seemed like the logical next step. The instantaneous success is owed to the titillation in her initial stories that made 'sex' a part of the women's lives more so than preparing food in the kitchen, thus breaking another social taboo.

De's Conflict.

What makes Shobha De's work interesting is the conflict that pervades the existence of all the women characters in her book. Karuna in "Socialite Evenings" is not happy in her relationship and feels the constant anxiety of having an affair, even though her peer group displays no such qualms. In "Strange Obsession", Amrita wants her marriage even though she continues to feel some desire for her lesbian partner. In "Sisters", Miki wants to be close to her sister even though she has total disdain for her father and mother. Maya remains trapped in a sexless marriage, yet does not know how to find an alternative in "Second Thoughts". This superficial exploration of conflict and dissatisfaction in the psyche of her women characters is underlined in her non fictional books that aim to guide and advise women. For instance in the non-fiction work titled 'Spouse' - a guide book on successful marital relationship- the second one in the same genre 'Speedpost' - is built around teaching children about relationships; in these texts, De' emphasizes homemaking along with clichéd modernisms as apparent in her write up on techniques for 'women to stay on top'. Her characters represent the phenomenon of an Indian 'urban middle class girlhood' that grown women are not able to shake off as they age and try unconsciously to break away from.

De's Dissent.

During the 1950s -70s, girls in schools and women *housewives* were exposed to Western writing; Mills & Boons genre of simplistic unreal romances, Victoria Holt's mystery and romance, Sidney Sheldon's graphic sexual romances, and Harold Robin's sleazy romance opened an exciting world full of thrills and sex, a novelty for underexposed minds and restrained spirits and agency (Cullity & Prakash, 2004). These texts abounded with descriptions of sex, perversion, and abuse but were tolerated by middle class families or the nuns at the school libraries because they were written by Western authors, and the disassociation between the book characters, their lives and that of its audience was unmistakable. However in De's work, the content, while remaining true to the essence of pulp fiction, now propped up similar content in a very familiar context that resembled people and places of urban middle class India. Even if only superficially, it resembled *Indianness* in names, situations, attire, and dialogue. The real and next door kind of imagery, especially of sex and the reactions of the audience was instantaneous, the rejection at a social level is absolute and at an individual level stimulating. Shobha De's writing brought out the rigid *moralism* associated with public spaces by her native readers and also the violation of social norms of keeping sex outside the public purview. This is then De's contribution, her dissent from the agreeable and acceptable.

Even though her characterization is weak, her storyline predictable, her descriptions inane and trite, she is honest in her dissent. She writes sex into the middle class life of women to replace the cooking and cleaning. Before De', the pulp, the mediocre, the hoi polloi of middle class entertainment had not been able to do so. Her motivations for the same cannot be readily answered, but the outcome of her effort has been pivotal in breaking a taboo that was restrictive for mainly women - reading openly about sex.

De's Social Documenting.

De's writings make it easy to guess at the genesis of her work. She exaggerates what will get attention (the graphic sex scenes) and she skimps over what will be uninteresting to the larger audience. Her writing is very blasé, descriptions minimalist, and language clear. She has weak plots, weaker characters, and sketchy and unconvincing descriptions; there is no hallucinating visionary of Thomas Hardy to be found here (Bernard, 2009). And yet, Shobha De' the journalist does manage to give an iconic version of an alternate femininity for Indian women through her pulp fiction in English that reaches out to more women than men.

De is a Journalist who began her career writing about films and modeling. De came into young adulthood in the early 1970's, a time when the cultural exchange had already begun and young convent-educated women like De' were exposed to the world of Western authors that contradicted sharply with their puritanical ones, spent under the close observation of family and nuns. Her writing explicates a sort of desperation for the inaccessible, and by providing a murky version that shows pathways leading to it; she raises questions of its desirability and inaccessibility in the first place.

The underlying text, though, is that De' does not claim any feminist or literary credentials. The 'shooting from the hip' form of writing is employed in all journalistic undertakings; an eye catching headline with a supplemental shoulder, followed by a brief snippet that focuses on the interesting, not the relevant, not the significant, just the interesting detail that makes the story newsworthy. In this light her work fits in with pulp fiction that "*uses largely fixed generic features to satisfy the largely fixed reading expectations of as large a market as possible*" (Khair 61). Her books also reflect limitations of her personality. It must be noted that De's writing itself is not well researched, nor very insightful; for instance the descriptions of cities other than Bombay remain static and reflect a lack of research and *lived* experience across her work; comparative works in pulp written in vernacular reveal richer and fuller descriptions that are both part of the dialogue and physical contexts. She is a *Bombayite,* and in keeping with the city's character and resident credo, the world of sophistication and intrigue apparently starts and ends there (Dugger, 1998). In her books everything outside Bombay is envisioned as a part of rural India. Characters in her novels that come to Bombay from other cities, even from larger cities with a large urban population like Delhi, are simple, unsophisticated and not Bombay-worldly wise enough.

De' and her publishers aimed to reach out to the Indian middle class public. They picked a topic of universal appeal, film stars and glitz, and celebrities and high glamour lifestyle. The next step to universal appeal is controversy and De' gives that amply with her novels. She exaggerates and provides enough material to make her readers guess about the identity of the celebrity. This is probably motivated both by her own insecurities at not being completely ostracized from her material, and also some form of commitment to those she writes about. She also keeps the judgment to a minimum, and the readers are forced to make their own decisions about the motivations of a character and her choices and why she behaves in a given way. This could be construed as an artistic way to disassociate with the readers, and in writing as explicitly as she does about sex, the absence of judgment makes it easy for her reader to read on, guilt free and judgmental at the same time. However, this format also keeps the reader wanting some affirmation that she and De' are on the same page and that the reader "gets it".

The art of her work is the touch of reality, where the inference is that she is talking about real episodes and real people to create *reality television* kind of stories, which leave the audience unfulfilled, unconvinced, and primarily un-empathetic to her characters. In doing so, despite the quality of her writing, repetitive plots, and underdeveloped characterizations, she created drama by talking about the issues of incest, abuse, and intimacy against the milieu of traditional and patriarchal social setting.

On the other hand, the non-fictional writing of De' has an oppositional quality to her fictional work. The topics of marriage, raising children, politics, and economy reveal a *positivity* bias, a confidence in her womanhood, and a sincere, if intellectually tepid attempt at searching for solutions. The central woman character of her novels stand in strong contrast; the victimization and helplessness that elicit very little empathy from the readers is not a woman De' appears to identify with. And in this way, De' again reaffirms the identity of being Indian, middle class, and a woman – the woman on top who makes compromises to ensure a better life for her children and maintains social expectations while still being true to herself. Her Non-fiction work seems to be an extension of her novels in one sense at least. It remains predictable in places, a *pop psychology*, *self-help* genre with its writing style tailored to an audience of Indian women, but still a little more substance than her works of fiction. De' writes about family relationships, her life, marriage, advice to children, and handling men; not original or path breaking topics and yet they offer women a positive guide that is in *Indianspeak* – interwoven with Indian cultural values and traditions (importance of family and self). In these texts, sex seems to be less of a focus and instead, commitment and communication in a relationship becomes a priority; all the same, the missing component in her writing seems to be sincerity and passion.

De' and Public Opinion.

Popular opinions, book reviews, and our discussion groups reveal that there are people on both sides of the De' writing-appreciation-camp; from being considered "clichéd and valueless" to "bold, courageous, and admirably politically incorrect", the jury is always out on Shobha De'. If one group feels that she has no substance, then there are others who like her for bringing out the underbelly of the rich and famous, the very group that she strived to be a part of, is a part of, and yet has no qualms talking about its weaknesses and failures. Today, with the advent of Twitter, Facebook, and blogging, the novelty of what she did might have worn off. But De' is the protagonist of this genre of fake and real in realism in a much more insulated and separated world that today when there was very little by way of interaction between the inhabitants of the two groups.

Who is Shobha De's Audience?

The publisher is probably better suited to answer this question. But reflecting on De's writing, it is primarily that of a magazine journalist who writes what she thinks is newsworthy, attention grabbing, and will get her a byline. It would appear that she is writing for everyone, the masses and the intellectuals, but primarily for herself. She is still fascinated by a world she so derides; she has a lot to say about it, to convey to the common (wo)man, (people like her who need to know) why it was not worth it and yet also to inform them that she belongs and that is gratifying. Her initial work was for the readers of a magazine, Stardust, a classy tabloid on Bollywood celebrities read by housewives and college girls who were *convented* and exposed to choices, and might be experiencing the starts of conflict, some confusion, and the boredom of their own restrained middle class living. The 'Indian version of Jackie Collins' with explicit sexual content, Indian context, all in English was a novelty.

De has a daily blog in which she comments on daily events and hopes to make herself even more marketable, in keeping with Celebrity trends. The entries in her blog at the time of writing this paper were on *Shashi-Tharoor-Sunanda Pushkar-IPL* drama and *Sonia-Mirza–Shoaib-Akhtar-Wedding* controversy. The key motivation here continues to be 'controversy", the salability quotient of a magazine and newspaper. The insistent and consistent writing further points to her journalism background, she probably does not write for a living, yet it seems to be a priority, a need to identify with work as part of her identity. Again like a journalist, her compulsions seem to be writing exposé, the focus being the perceived pseudo-*Indianness* in the Indian psyche, while at the same time recognizing that it is the *Indianness* in the Indian psyche that sells her work.

Missing Links.

Her stories lack a purpose, like a city brief on murder and rape reported in the inside pages of a newspaper; they are shocking and leave you aghast but do not stay with you all day. Her novels do not focus on a situation or problem, or the protagonist woman. The problem is not fully developed, the solutions are not identified; this is because she does not tell a complete story', but only a part of the story, the part she thinks will grab attention. The richness and depth that comes from a discussion of context is always missing, and she stays away from examining the parallel relationships and their meaning to her women characters. She skims the surface in a two dimensional description of woman and her one relationship, and then moves on; there are no messages, except that glamour leads to heart ache and unhappiness. She hints at drawbacks in a middle class family and its overall functioning, but the writing style conveys brevity of depth, and unsurity of underlying dynamics thus making it easy to forget this aspect of the content.

Her protagonist is conflicted and finds it difficult to accept the social norms, but when she violates them it leads to more hurt and discontentment than fulfillment. Women in her novels are often looking for fame, security, and stardom while seeking the stability of a loving, committed, and fulfilling relationship with an ideal MAN. The protagonist is also a survivor, a woman who fights, figures out a way to keep moving on, while trying to find and build a better and interesting life. However, they lack direction and focus. The women characters don't know what they are looking for; their choices are more circumstantial than directional and different from those made by other characters in the book.

The women in De's world want to have positions that are womanly and in keeping with the cultural mores of womanhood in their social contexts, yet they are willing to be gender neutral in exercise of their agency by using a goal centered approach that borders on unethical. These are also very current values, reflective of urban, consumer, and global cultures, and the noncommittal positioning of self against norms and ethics alike (Dwyer, 1998). The space for self-oriented-consumption extends beyond material goods into material experiences, and this is also a part of the ethos of De's world. By design and by its nascent stage, it is a world with flexible boundaries. This is then the ideal setting of a maverick style feminism of Derrida that "plays on the very boundaries of signification, and thereby reveals the limits of symbolic exchange (386) especially when the meanings of symbolic exchange have multiple interpretations. “Instead, it serves as an injunction that we have to behave 'as if' our actions where guided by some principle. Nevertheless, we can never use it to justify our actions. Justification remains deferred indefinitely.” (Holms & Cilliers 392). In keeping with Holms and Cilliers interpretation of Derrida’s feminism, the perspective presented in this paper argues that De’ manages to traverse the different boundaries of social constructs by the very commonness of her work and language and the positioning of it in the current day contexts. It opens the possibility of exploring, in the fashion of Derrida, a feminism that goes “beyond which is invoked in the ideals to which feminism aspire” (393).

In conclusion, this perspective is in a large part supported by the identity and accomplishments of Shobha De’, her two marriages, her multifaceted identity, with illustrations of exercise of agency in both randomly and a planned manner, unsurity of her creative self that make it difficult to predict or classify her as a socialite or a celebrity or a cerebral person with her own theory of women’s emancipation. What one can say with certainty that in writing De’ manages to cross numerous boundaries and flaunts the permeability of social contexts, values, and relationships and that too with resounding success. In true feminist fashion, she contributes to the possibility of her agency becoming a trend and genesis of new and organic feminisms.

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