Chapter 9- Treading on Different Walks of Life-
Shobha De’s Selective Memory

Shobha De’s autobiography Selective Memory¹ is remarkable for its depiction of experiences of various fields of life. She has been a writer, an editor of a magazine and a model. Her book is peopled with a large variety of characters from these various walks of life.

The sub-title of the book is Stories from My Life- as in the case of the title of Kamla Das’ autobiography, the word ‘stories’ in the sub-title suggests the fictional element in the autobiography.

The dedication reflects the writer’s honesty- in spite of her image as a writer who writes about sex, she is not secretive about her love and respect for Lord Ganesha and family. It shows that she believes in the concept of family.

Some part of Shobha De’s been made up of the values inherited from her father. A professional that her father is, he instills the principle of ‘nothing comes easy, nothing is delivered on a platter’ upon her impressionable mind and this principle stays with her all her life. ‘Youth is meant for character-building’, her idealist father tells her in her youth and she detests it. She finds herself repeating the same words to her children.

257
when they come of age. So however she may hate the father’s idealism, it seems to have made a deep mark upon her mind. Her ‘animus’ seems to be a strong, firm, guiding, protective, idealist father. She projects this image upon Nari Hira, the manager of an advertising agency, with whom she works as a copywriter and who shows her some kind of direction to her life.

In spite of this, Shobha De can be rebellious to her father. When she comes of age, she is not allowed to wear sleeveless blouses, cut her hair in a fringe, use make-up, listen to the western station of All India Radio, dance [even by herself], wear perfumes, jeans or grown-up outfits or behave in any manner that may attract attention. In the opinion of Jung,

The father represents the world of moral commandments and prohibitions ² and it is the same with Shobha De’s father. Shobha De views upon all this as parental domination and resents it. So she defies the fatherly authority—she goes in for western music, occasional swigs of beer, western dancing, trendy hair-styles and fashions, waxing of unwanted hair, high heels, mascara, Hollywood magazines and racy books. At times the way she rebels against him seems to be rather mawkish—she travels without tickets in local trains, furtively smokes stolen cigarettes, pinches restaurant menus
as souvenirs and races down Marine Drives on a hired bike, hanging on to the rail of a double-decker bus for extra speed. Significantly enough, she does not need the help of any 'wise old man' while thus breaking patriarchal taboos. Instead, she herself inspires her older sisters to revolt against the parental authority in this way.

Of course, she at times gives in to the wishes of the father—she paints a voluptuous nude and keeps it for drying on a second-floor balcony in full view of interested office-goers, which shows her tendency to draw public attention to herself. The same tendency later on leads her to write ‘pornographic’ novels. The father does not appreciate her portrait—he wants her to paint flowers, trees, birds, mountains instead of such ‘vulgar’ paints and so Shobha De stops painting altogether.

In the course of time, her rebelliousness seems to have summoned up courage and graduated to a more mature level. Thus, she goes in for a divorce after eight years of married life against the wishes of her father. Then the father becomes ‘terrible father’- he does not let her stay at his home, she is not welcome at his home except as an occasional visitor. Despite this, she sticks to her decision. She goes in for a remarriage against the wishes of the father. She writes ‘sexy’ novels, which is a rejection of the puritanical values of the father. Even after earning a lot of
money, she always lives very simply, while the father wants her to show off her wealth by wearing jewellery or grand clothes or throwing lavish parties. Her father never hugs her after she comes of age and she dislikes it. So she startles him by kissing him on the cheek on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. In her own relations with her children, she tries to be a more ‘touchy-feely’ parent.

As far as her relations with the mother are concerned, as a child, she has been moddycoddled by her mother- her mother meets with her unreasonable demands. As Krishna Hutheesingh and Kamla Das exemplify that parental neglect can be detrimental to the development of personality, Shobha De exemplifies that parental pampering can be equally disastrous for it. Like Krishna Hutheesingh, Shobha De does not get school education for a long time – the pampering mother does not send her to school till the age of seven. In the opinion of Jung, school education is very necessary for the widening of the child’s world. Unfortunately, her life remains confined to the happy, warm, secure world of the mother’s affection for a long time. It creates some psychological problems for her. She develops superiority complex and also becomes self-centred- during the final ailment of the mother, she can not accept the changes the sickness has brought about in her, she wants the mother to be just like the loving
mother she was in her childhood. Her superiority complex at times leads her to alienate herself from others and to look down upon them— in her college years, she joins a group of self-conscious ‘intellectuals’, which considers itself to be ‘the masters of the universe... great looking, well read, well informed... too good for the other hicks in the class’.

Her superiority complex occasionally makes it difficult for her to understand others— she does not understand the fact that when her father tries to regulate her life, he has a valid reason for doing so— when she is a small child, a middle-aged person has tried to make a crude pass at her. Her vanity also leads her to be easily flattered by praise and hurt by criticism.

A pampered child, she becomes childish in nature and in her adulthood, she often retains a childish strain in her character— as an adult, much to the embarrassment of her children, she can not help dancing when her favourite song is played. This childishness seems to be her way of reverting to the lost world of childhood, which she loves very dearly. This childishness makes it difficult for her to maturely cope with difficult situations in her adolescence. In the final year of her school life, she has to study science subjects, in which she is not a bit interested. So she hits a low in the examination, which makes her dejected. According to the
archetypal theory, in such a situation, the best way out is to reform oneself and then to try to reform the situation. However, people generally go in for the easy option of being 'a trickster'. The same happens with Shobha De, who also becomes 'a trickster'. She plays an 'April fool' joke on the school by inviting the fire brigade to the school, giving it the false information that a fire has erupted in the school. The headmistress rusticates her temporarily from the school for playing this silly prank, which leaves her demoralized and disillusioned. The 'trickster' in her also manifests itself in the puerile way she defies the fatherly authority. Later on she seems to have outgrown the 'trickster' stage but still the trickster in her comes up at times. When she joins the modeling business, while others take the business seriously, she revels in 'clownishly' observing them. She herself compares her writing 'pornographic' books like _Sisters_ or _Strange Obsessions_, with the full awareness of the public backlash it may invite, with 'a kid sticking his or her tongue out at the class-teacher and awaiting the reaction'. This may be explained in the light of Jung’s opinion that even though one may outgrow the stage of being 'a trickster', the ‘trickster’ in one is only withdrawn into the unconscious due to lack of energy and it may surface again.
Shobha De has immense love for her mother probably because the mother represents the happy world of childhood. According to the archetypal theory, one feels like returning to the protective world of the womb, especially when one is in pain. So when she slips off the steel feet of an escalator in London, the first image that comes to her mind is that of the mother. There can be another reason for this love—while the father exercises authority over her, the mother tries to understand her. In the view of Jung, while the father is a custodian of cultural values, the mother is often kind and sympathetic to the child. With her elemental wisdom, she understands even the rebellious behavior of the child. The same is true of Shobha De’s mother, who understands her non-conformism. This image of an ‘understanding mother’ serves as a role model for Shobha De. When she meets with a stranger who tells her with tears in his eyes that his wife has left him, she feels like reaching across to him, hugging and comforting him as she would a child. She seems to try to unconsciously imitate her ‘understanding’ mother. Shobha De projects this image of the ‘understanding mother’ upon Kunda, her elder sister. On the occasion of Shobha De’s fiftieth birthday, her father organizes a ‘satyanarayan puja’. As Shobha De’s mother is not alive at that time, Kunda instinctively takes
charge of the whole affair. Then Shobha De sees her ‘understanding mother’ in Kunda-

Dressed in a resplendent kanjeevaram, Kunda had instinctively and effortlessly slipped into the vacated role, and once or twice when I caught a flash of purple saree as she swept in and out of the room, I thought I saw my ‘Aie’- not someone like her. Not a daughter who resembled her, but Mother herself. 

Shobha De also inherits one quality from the mother- just like the mother, she is never overawed by anybody to the extent that she feels the need to alter her natural behavior and pretend to be someone she is not.

Despite this, Shobha De does not remain stuck up in the mother’s world but moves on to a new and different world- a world with which the mother is thoroughly unfamiliar – a world of modeling, a film magazine, advertising, cosmetics, dates and boyfriends. Her wide exposure to the world matures her personality- she overcomes her narcissism. While working with a film magazine, she has been offered roles in a film by someone as great as the late Mr. Satyajit Ray. Still she turns down the offer on the grounds that she will make a lousy actress and her embarrassment will show through. The person who once belonged to the group of self-proclaimed ‘intellectuals’ becomes modest about her intelligence- even after publishing three novels, she does not take herself seriously. Her
tendency to alienate herself from others and look down upon them also dissolves. She becomes able to put up with others' weaknesses, as evidenced by her definition of marriage—

being together, even at times when the sight, smell and sound of the other drives you crazy.  

At the age of fifty, she comes to accept herself for what she is. She strikes a perfect balance between her traditional and modern selves. Each time she visits Goa, she makes it a point to visit the four hundred years old Mangeshi temple that houses her family-deity. It is perhaps because of her faith in God that unlike a professedly atheist autobiographer like Suneeta Deshpande, Shobha De does not have fear of death. When on the fiftieth birthday, the thought of death firstly strikes her mind, it does not scare her or sadden her heart.

Shobha De has some love for nature. Even fearful aspects of nature like clouds of marauding locusts blanking out the sun stay permanently in her memory. She remembers with fondness the afternoons she has spent in Delhi because the afternoons represent the warmth of her childhood. Thus, the book reveals different aspects of the man-nature relationship.

In the ultimate analysis, Shobha De marks the ultimate stage in the individuation of the Indian woman—far from being in need of a 'wise old
man’, she herself becomes a source of inspiration for others in breaking social taboos.

At a place, Shobha De tries to probe the subconscious reasons behind her not recalling the triumphs she won as an athlete during her school years-

I wonder why my mind is so blank about what these glorious moments meant to me back then. Surely that’s what the effort was for, that’s why the dawn training, strict diet, disciplined practice and regimented hours? Or was it? Maybe I enjoyed the physical process for itself and my efforts had nothing whatsoever to do with the triumphs that followed. Maybe the thrill actually lay in the pleasure I received from jumping, sprinting, throwing.?

It is very rarely that she makes such a profound self-analysis.

The self-portrait has been delineated with a lot of honesty— the unsavory aspects of her life like her playing a ‘trickster’ in the final year of the school-life and being rusticated from the school for it, the childish strain in her character, her occasional cruelty to people, her insensitivity to the pains of the mother in the latter’s final ailment have also found place in the book.

The character of Dilip— the second husband— has been dealt with quite comprehensively. Dilip, as the book portrays him, is something like
an idealist, a resourceful person, a broad-minded husband, a mature father.

There is some objectivity in the presentation of this character - the fact that her life with him is not all hunky-dory has not been hidden -

We have had our rough moments, bumpy patches, arguments, disagreements and fights. There have been tears, accusations and recriminations. 8

The book is crowded with a number of characters, drawn from different areas of life like modeling, advertising and film industry. Most of these characters are ‘flat’ - they have not been dealt with very comprehensively.

Apart from being individuals in their own right, some of the characters in the book are representatives of their generation in some ways. The writer’s mother is also a representative of the generation, as she grieves over the birth of the daughter, while her being sympathetic to the rebellious behavior of the daughter makes her an individual in her own right.

On few occasions, Shobha De tries to probe the subconscious motives behind the actions or decisions of some of her characters -

She tries to probe the mind of Sarika, a film-actress who quits the film world and marries Kamal Hasan and who is a non-conformist in her dress, hairstyle and other things. She once surprises Shobha De by quoting
extensively from the film magazines she has read. Regarding this, Shobha De raises questions-

It was amusing and touching to see the extent of her interest and involvement in a world she’d left behind years ago. Did she perhaps miss just a little? Did she long for the limelight? Was being Kamal Hasan’s wife and the mother of his daughter enough? Why the platinum hair, the provocative underwear-as-outer-wear? Why the non-conformism, the deliberate breaking of age-old rules? Was it the attention they received?  

Shobha De’s narrative-style is unconventional in certain respects. At some places, she varies the narrative-technique by giving it a dialogic form—she addresses to the person she is talking about—

...women who gush at parties, ‘We love your columns, yaar. But we have yet to read your books’. Take your time, darlings. No hurry. By then, I’ll have written ten more ...and you’ll be wearing dentures.

At times her writing seems to be something like loud thinking—

Rekha was an unknown when she walked in with Vinod Mehra (dead now). Let me see...First impression? Gross. She was overweight, loud, giggly and ridiculously dressed.

Similarly, even though the incidents narrated in the first eleven chapters are generally in a chronological order, the last three chapters have been written in the ‘anti-memoir’ technique.
The book makes abundant use of figures of speech, which reflects the writer’s quest for freedom. Some of the similes are derived from nature—

The man’s eyes were like glowing coals. 17

A simile belongs to the world of religion—

By the time Avantika arrived, I was like the smiling Buddha. 18

Significantly enough, this is the only archetypal image that occurs in the book, which shows the modern woman’s moving away from the collective consciousness to the individual consciousness. Some of the similes have been drawn from the field of cinemas- she compares the photographs of her heady triumphs on the stadium with ‘an old movie starring someone familiar’. 19 A large number of similes are related with school life. Regarding her giving in the firstly written advertisement to the manager of an advertising agency, she tells us,

I handed over the sheets like a school-girl
living in a badly written test-paper for grading. 20

These similes reflect her obsession with the childhood world and the childish strain in her character. Some similes are from the world of science and technology- her yet-to-be-born daughter floating around inside her
womb has been compared with ‘an astronaut in space- weightless, out of control, limbs moving spasmodically’. 21

Just like similes, a number of metaphors belong to the world of animals and birds. She talks about the manager of an advertising agency who asks her for date as ‘a bearded dog with a comical Brit accent’. 22

Some of the metaphors are sexy-

Virgin manuscripts were a turn-on too.23

Some metaphors are from the field of science and technology-

…But the book still wouldn’t disappear from my mental radar. 24

Thus, the range of similes and metaphors is very wide, which reflects the wide range of the writer’s knowledge and experience.

The style reflects the unconventional nature of the writer.

Shobha De has coined some new adjectives-

It’s true I’m not the ‘Hello beta. How are you, darling?’ kind of mom’. 25

Like Mulk Raj Anand or N.Raja Rao, Shobha De has transported some Indian words in English, without putting them in inverted commas or trying to explain their meanings –

Were we planning to make complete kachara out of our beloved sitarey? 26
At some places, she has put an Indian word in inverted commas but left it to the reader to understand its meaning-

Outdoor locations were where the real ‘lafdas’ took place. 

Such words give a local flavour to her style. Shobha De has also coined some new nouns like ‘Oprah-Winfreyization’, ‘egotitis’ or ‘jokey-jokey’. At one place, while trying to express her surprise, she spells the word ‘what?’ as ‘Whaaat?’. At another place, she spells the word ‘bad’ as ‘b-a-a-d’ to stress the badness of an experience. At a place, while talking about a yell, she has printed the word ‘Avantika’ as ‘A-VAN-TI-KA’ to give the actual feel of the yell. At a place, while talking about the ‘proper’ British accent of a person, she has printed the word ‘proper’ as ‘propah’ to give the feel of British accent. These linguistic innovations make her style very interesting.

In conclusion, it may be said that the book is certainly remarkable for its comprehensive self-portrait, wide range of characters, unusual narrative-style and highly innovative language-style.
References


4 Ibid. 173.

5 Ibid. 6.

6 Ibid. 58.

7 Ibid. 480.

8 Ibid. 451.

9 Ibid. 513.

10 Ibid. 240.

11 Ibid. 480.

12 Ibid. 156.

13 Ibid. 414.

14 Ibid. 182.

15 Ibid. 70/

16 Ibid. 260.
17 Ibid. 371.
18 Ibid. 105.
19 Ibid. 8.
20 Ibid. 8.
21 Ibid. 55.
22 Ibid. 75.
23 Ibid. 525.
24 Ibid. 502.
25 Ibid. 2.
26 Ibid. 25.
27 Ibid. 75.