Chapter -3

VERSATILE STYLE OF

SHOBHA DE
VERSATILE STYLE OF SHOBHAAN DE

Intelligence always faces opposition. This is a world in which talent and brilliance has always been the target of criticism and flaws been highlighted.

Shobhaa De is one of the most popular writers among many contemporary Indo-English novelists. Her novels have been read and acclaimed far and wide. The popularity of her writings has made her a household name and some of her novels have found place in bestsellers lists. In spite of her popularity as a writer, academicians and literary critics have often expressed their dislike and contempt for her writings by not considering her works worth literary examination. The major cause of deliberate neglect shown to her fiction is the treatment of sex in her novels. Her novels have been considered cheap and vulgar and a form of popular fiction only. A careful study of De’s fiction marks the traditional and prejudiced nature of the views expressed about her novels. A critical study of De’s novels, in this context, reveals that De has not only concentrated on the presentation of a strange and startling world marking the emergence of recent trends in society but also shown her concern for the problems faced by contemporary high society women. The way she has presented women’s life and behavior in her novels brings out her feminist leanings. De’s fictional world marks the overwhelming presence of women. In almost all her novels, a woman is a protagonist. The life spectacle and the world-view presented in her novels are directly or indirectly related to women. Women’s behavior, their thoughts and their responses in different situations forms the main concern of De’s fictional works. In her novels we come across a variety of women from extremely modern, assertive, young and liberated to the traditional housewives. Her concentration on modern women’s life and their immediate problems makes the presence of feminist perspective an essential aspect of her fiction. In spite of the mocking tone, casual attitude and depersonalized nature of her fiction, De does not seem to be indifferent to women’s problem. Her concern for women’s sufferings and their marginalization can be ascertained from the way she has arranged and structured her fictional discourse. She does not proclaim to be a feminist yet she is sensitive enough to expose different ways of women’s subjugation in a male dominated world. The depiction of women’s problem in
her fiction is considered to be one of the major factors of De’s popularity as a writer, *One of the major reasons of Shobhaa De’s popularity as a writer is her intimate understanding of woman and her problems.* However the presentation of modern, rich, educated and assertive women in Shobhaa De’s fiction marks a difference from traditional women’s problems.

I am a risk taker. I thrive on challenge. I like newness. And I am not afraid of failure. I have done many varied things in my life and enjoyed them all. My own publishing imprint was offered to me by the Chairman of Penguin Books, Mr. John Makinson, last April. It is a huge honour and a responsibility. I have been a consulting editor with Penguin for years. This new role is an extension of what I had been doing for them in any case. I am having the most wonderful time finding new voices!

There are people who go gaga over her books, just as there are other protest and indignation over her themes and characters. A trail blazer all her life, she is unperturbed when it comes to speaking her mind on controversial issues regarding life and love. She has been a model, an advertising copywriter, a founder editor of popular magazines, a national columnist, a television script writer, and the author of dozen books. She is articulate, well informed and an affectionate mother.

There is a popular Indian chronicler who takes the breath of Mumbai to her heart. She is a coveted chronicler of Mumbai and Bollywood, with a successful background in modeling. Her letters to the children set a new trend in India. She is none other than Shobhaa De, the celebrity writer who changed the face of Indian novel with her first novel *Socialite Evenings.*

Fiery at times and soft at others, it is difficult to categorize author Shobhaa De. The writer manages to get everyone interested in what she has to say even if they don't concur with her, writes Subha J Rao.

She has an image that even members of her tribe are not very comfortable with. And, her opinions are radical, to say the least.
What do you make of a woman, who at 60 is so vibrant she would put a teenager to shame? And, before you think she is the bra-burning kind of feminist, wait! She is the proud and glamorous mother of six children ranging from 13-30. Trying to slot author Shobhaa De is a difficult task. And, something she hates, too.

From Anna Hazare to the slut walk, Shobhaa De has an opinion on every issue that lurks in our collective consciousness. And she accepts both bouquets and brickbats with élan. With a magazine recently dissecting her writing style, she was on the receiving end of harsh criticism (yet again). But negativity doesn’t bog her down.

“Uncompromising self-belief,” she attests is the only way she can continue doing what she loves to do, which is write. The spontaneous and bold Shobhaa De attended the two-day National Colloquium on Indian women writers in English.

She says, Writing is a part of me. I have no other option but to be loyal to my conscience and let the rest go. If you have a strong opinion on something, you will generate a strong response.

She says, The writing scene is fast changing. I am truly optimistic about the possibilities. But the women of today need to stand up for themselves. Honestly, no one else is going to do so for us. Setting physical superiority aside, women are capable human beings.

Being a woman of potent words, De isn’t too fond of censorship. “I understand the huge responsibility of making statements that can cause havoc in a country like ours. But every individual needs to know how much heat you like in your kitchen. Some call Assange a hero, others think he deserves worse. But he knew the consequences of his actions. That is the best form of censorship.”

Despite her presence in the mainstream media, De has a blog link where she writes regularly. She calls herself ‘an interesting and unpredictable package’. I am spontaneous and I like to surprise myself. My blog is my personal uncensored space where I share my thoughts. It is evident that I receive negative comments and often uncalled for abuse in abundance here as well. But I have no other option but to ignore it. Writing is a
compelling form of self-expression that I indulge in, for just me. Everything else takes a backseat when I am writing, she adds with a defiant smile. (2)

Shobhaa De A Living Legend:

Shobhaa de does not require an introduction. She is an author, socialite, celebrity, former beauty queen and model, columnist, designer and pen behind popular TV serials like Kitty Party and Swabhimaan. Shobhaa De continues to fascinate one and all. She is the role model and icon several women dream to be. She is a determined lady who was never overawed by money or fame. Shobhaa De was born on January 7, 1948. She did her Mass Communication from Bhavans College at the age of 22, and then started off as a trainee copywriter at 'Creative unit' which was Nari Hira's advertising agency and then went on to become the editor. She knew exactly what she wanted and at what stage of her life. She herself carved a niche in the literary circles and media with her sense of elegance and acquaintances with various celebrities starting from poets, painters, journalists, models, photographers to the Bollywood stars. Shobhaa De has innumerable fans not only in India but also abroad. Her youthful looks and bestselling books make her one of the most popular faces in India. Shobhaa De is also referred to as the Jackie Collins of India. Shobhaa De who has already seen 60 birthdays and is a mother of six was born in a Maharashtrian Brahmin family. After graduating from the reputed St Xaviers College in Mumbai, she also made a name for herself as a model. She started her career in Journalism in 1970 and has founded and edited reputed magazines like Stardust, Society and Celebrity. She also has been Consulting Editor to Sunday and Mega City. Her columns in Bombay Times, The Sunday Times and The Week are extremely popular. She also contributes as free lance writer to reputed magazines and newspapers including The Times of India, Statesman and Sunday Observer. Shobhaa met her second husband Dilip De in the year 1981 and married him after an amicable divorce from her first husband in the year 1984. Shobhaa De lives with her family in Cuffe Parade, a posh locality in Mumbai. The erotic content in her novels had been a subject of controversy and had her prefixed as a rebel. But one cannot forget the fact that Shobhaa De is one of India’s top bestselling authors who has made Indians proud. Her novels are featured in the post graduate popular culture curriculum of the University of London.
Her rapier sharp wit, her incisive writing, her penchant to call a spade a spade, has all contributed to her signature style over the years. She spares none as a social commentator. Author, columnist, fashion designer, socialite and now publisher, Shobhaa De continues to reinvent herself as years roll on. The twice married mother of six works at her own pace (she still writes her columns in a longhand scrawl seated at her dining table), by her own admission, has “calluses the size of cashew nuts” owing to her compulsive writing and locks in tweets, blog posts and a scathing critique of current events into her hectic daily schedule.

Shobhaa De stands unequalled in proficiency and panache. She has scripted popular serials like Swabhimaan and Kitty Party, spawned the use of Hinglish in writing and morphed into an ace at spotlighting cruel home truths, especially for women. India's best selling authoress in pulp fiction, De has often being dubbed as India's Jackie Collins. A tag she doesn't exactly treasure - although four of her 13 novels feature in the post-graduate popular culture curriculum of the University of London.

She writes in her 1998 book Selective Memory: Stories from My Life, We were taught early in life that nothing comes easy, nothing is delivered on a platter. As the country's most widely read columnist today, De wields the power to shape and mobilize public opinion through her musings. Her columns in Bombay Times, The Sunday Times and The Week, have a mindboggling estimated readership of over 10 million a month.

Known for her gung-ho spirit and speak-my-mind attitude, Shobhaa De had been a source of inspiration for many women back in the day. In an age when sex-talk was taboo and even a mere reference of the three-letter word embarrassed the ladies, India had its first female erotic author. At a time when the country was romancing the magical wonder of cable TV, Shobha added the much needed ‘it’ factor to books. And though many have often criticized her way of writing and banished it as pure thrash or soft porn, it rarely stopped them from reading it. Call her books chick-lit or mere erotic literature; they presented the many facets of a woman that were anything but pretty. In fact, her heroines were sensuous, beautiful and smart yet conniving, conspiracy-hatching women who were so driven by power and luxury that they had to do anything to get their wants.
Shobhaa De is one of India’s top best-selling authors. All her books have topped the charts and created records. *Spouse – The Truth About Marriage*, that examines the urban institution of marriage, sold 20,000 copies on the day of its official launch in Delhi and is currently being translated into several languages. De gave a new definition to the mass market best seller with her breakthrough, bold and highly individualistic style that spoke a new language. She is credited with having given birth to “Hinglish,” a heady, irreverent mix of Hindi (India’s national language) and English (also recognized as one of the Indian language), that spoke to readers in an entirely new way. Four of her titles, namely, *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sultry Days*, and *Second Thoughts* are course material in the University of London. Her work features extensively in Comparative Literature courses at Universities abroad and within India. An academic examination of her books titled, *The Fiction of Shobhaa De*, compiled by Professor Dodiya, features 40 critical essays by academics – Indian and foreign. Over a hundred dissertations on her work are in various libraries worldwide. Recipient of several awards for her journalistic contributions, De writes prolifically for Indian and International publications. She runs four weekly columns in mainstream newspapers, including *The Times of India* and *Asian Age*. She has been the writer of several popular soaps on television, including India’s first daily soap, *Swabhimaan*. She also anchored a prestigious weekly show called *Power Trip* which featured India’s billionaires as never before. She participates on a regular basis on important TV debates, such as *The Editors’ Verdict* on Ndtv during the Elections 2009. She is recognized as an important social commentator and something of an authority on popular culture. Outspoken and forthright, De chronicles today’s India in her own inimitable style more recently via her immensely popular blog and Twitter account. Her books are best sellers in several regional languages, including Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Bengali and Marathi. *Bollywood Nights* was launched at the London Book Fair in April 2007 and for the American market in the same year, by Penguin International. The U.K. edition of her latest work, *Superstar India* was published in April 2009. *Superstar India* sold over 100,000 copies in India during its first year, to establish a new record. It will be published in America in September 2009. *Glitzernacht*, was launched at the prestigious Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006, followed by 4 more titles in German, with an additional 3 to follow. The first of her Italian books, *Sorelle* was

She was the chief guest at Chandigarh University’s Department of English in 2007, where she delivered the Presidential Address on *New Trends in Contemporary Writing*. De has participated in several literary festivals, including the prestigious Writers’ Festival in Melbourne. The Writers’ Festival in Hong Kong, Singapore and Jaipur, besides the literary festival called Kitaab in Mumbai. She has been invited to the Kovalam Lit Fest as well as the first South African Festival of Indian Authors in September 2009. Dubai Lit Fest in 2010. Jaipur Lit Fest 2010. Hay Lit Fest in the Maldives in 2010. Karachi Lit Fest in Feb 2011. There are over 50 dissertations on her work in publication. She was a part of the official Indian Delegation to the Global Women’s Forum at Deauville (France) in October 2008. She was a keynote speaker at the Leadership Conclave in Delhi, October 2009. The subject – *Has the Indian Woman Come of Age, Finally?* She is regularly invited to participate in prestigious All-India debates, like the annual one in Kolkata, The Telegraph Debate. Invited regularly as a leading television panelist on national issues by India’s top anchors, Arnab Goswami, Rajdeep Sardesia, Karan Thapar, considered one of the top Opinion Shapers in the region, she is on the *Readers’ Digest List – India’s Most Trusted People* published in March 2010, along with Ratan Tata and Dr. Abdul Kalam. She is on the list of *50 Most Powerful Women in India* published by the DNA Newspaper, March 2010, featured on the 2010 list of *India’s 50 Most Beautiful’ in Hi Blitz*. Her latest book is titled *Shobhaa at Sixty* and has been published by Hay House in 2010. 2010 saw her emerge as a Publisher in her own right, with the launch of her own imprint by Penguin Books, titled *The Shobhaa De Book*. Despite being a dizzying cocktail of these super womanly personas, De insists she is nothing but the girl next door, not a snob with whom Indian woman cannot identify. Describing her journey from being a middle-class girl with a lot of aspirations in life to becoming a bestselling author as “exciting”, Shobhaa De has no qualms calling herself a Feminist. The lady, who has depicted women as epitomes of power, liberty and beauty in her books, says “there should be no word like ‘compromise’ in the dictionary for women”. The author, whom critics love to hate, has
always had a penchant for writing steamy books, her feminist side coming to the fore, as
the female protagonists in her books love to flaunt their dark, sensuous sides, and are a
far cry from the female image that the male-dominated country wants to see in the
society. Moreover, her books have always revolved around the lives of the rich and the
famous.

**Daring De**

She juggles home, husband and six children, three weekly columns and a weekly talk
show on TV, churns out a bestseller each year and is more often than not hop scotching
around the globe promoting, speaking and shopping! She's a woman undeniably in
control.

Shove all that hype under the Persian carpet with a stiletto 'cause one woman outsells all
the laureates put together- Ms. Shobhaa De.

De, 62, easily India's most recognizable and glamorous columnists, is as much a
newsmaker as she is, in her own words, "a chronicler of our times." Not too long ago,
India Today, after years of scathing reviews and unflattering portraits, deemed her one of
the 50 Most Influential People in a nation of one billion. Tongue in chic, she raises her
perfect eyebrows when a complimentary review was published in the weekly, days after
her latest (her 14th) book hit the stands, "I must be doing something wrong."

Thoroughly amused, if not bemused, by the acerbic reviews, she remains firmly
unapologetic of her work, her words, and herself. Her latest book, *Spouse, The Truth
about Marriage* sold out its first print in 48 hours of release in New Delhi and the second
edition recently reached our smog-filled shores. *Someone collected the worst reviews
published ever and I think I had the most - around 315 of them from Asia alone*, laughs
De. *But it didn't stop me. I write because it keeps me sane, because I want to write, I need
to write. I write for me, not anyone else.*

The media at large slapped her with a label; the "Jackie Collins of Mumbai" - words that
make her flinch even a decade after the article appeared in print. She reveals, "I've never
met Jackie Collins but the comparison irritates me because I find it so completely absurd and irrelevant. It was just a lazy description by an American correspondent writing my profile in TIME magazine to make me accessible to an international readership because at the time, my first book was out and instead of just saying this person from India has written this book, he just thought it would be easier to say she's the Jackie Collins of Asia. It was the correspondent being cute and it's an albatross around my neck."

If her sharp profile is an asset, her sharper mind is a fusillade, carefully hidden under coiffed auburn curls.

Bollywood would have been the next inevitable step for this top model in Mumbai in the 1970's, but instead of appearing onscreen - despite offers from Oscar-winning auteur Satyajit Ray - she became the editor of the now-iconic Indian film magazine, Stardust.

Yes, as cheesy as it sounds, it was indeed a journal of what the fine feathered folks in the Indian celebrity circuit were up to. Fan-zines litter the Indian market but she chose to wipe the halo away from the screen demy-Gods (let's not forget India is a country that erects temples for their favourite actors) and wrote defiant editorials - a trend hitherto unchanged.

She found fame early but found the famous, boring, Some movie stars are big babies but that's their problem. I have my job, they can do theirs, she waves her diamond festooned hand about, shooting away imaginary flies, I think Indian celebrities [not unlike Hollywood!] are too accustomed to puff pieces and a level of sycophancy that I find sickening. There are people who are constantly feeding that ego. I couldn't do that. (3)

She does refrain from commenting on newcomers that hoard Bollywood, the Indian film capital. No potshots at the upcoming youngsters or star-children who she feels need time to grow into their boots. Perhaps it's that maternal instinct kicking in, after all she's a mother of six children aged between 16 and 32!

She does however; bring down the titans of Asia.
India's most popular actor Shahrukh Khan reacted very badly to a recent column penned by De. Brought to court to speak out against the Indian mafia, he turned into a hostile witness and retracted his statements made to the police. De called him a coward point blank.

Despite insisting there is no plan to keep herself in the news, Ms De has done nothing to hop out of it either.

*I don't live my life to outrage India. I'm not there to shock anybody. I say what I believe is the right thing to say, to state if it ends up breaking the rules, then the rules get broken but it's not by design. It is not a strategy.*

Despite having left film journalism, being married to wealthy businessman Dilip De, the high-profile couple attends parties where running into a star she's written about might make the meeting awkward, I presume.

Listed with Sonia Gandhi, as one of the most prominent personalities in India, De tries, but not too hard, to let her displeasure be known. *What astonished me about the selection was the fact that there were only four women in it, in the seventh biggest democracy in the world, when you handpick 50 and out of which only four women seem to count, one of whom happens to be a political leader by default that to me is a little depressing.*

*Will any other country on the planet have a foreigner as its leader?* she asks rhetorically.

In the husky yet clear-cut tone, her cadence picks up as she states, *I like the idea that women who find themselves on various lists for whatever reason as influence makers and as opinion makers, should do so on the strength of their own personal achievements, not because they are married to someone, not because they belong to a certain family and have things on a platter happening for them. That they should have risen to whatever position like Mayavati [a minister in India] has and shown courage, merit and should be inspirational figures in their own right which has nothing to do with their social position and standing, is commendable.*
As we meander through topics, it comes to mind that there has't been much discussion on her novels. The work she does at her dining table at home, eight hours a day, three columns each week and a book every other year, while bringing up six kids.

*The moment I'm done with a column, I forget about it. When people come and ask me what I said at that time, on that day, I go blank. I've moved on. They haven't.*

The novels well behind her, she's the woman behind one of India's most popular soaps on television too. De's repeated appearances in the social pages, in addition to her national columns, headed with glamorous photo bylines, indicate a workaholic who's moved bag and baggage to an office. On the contrary, she rarely leaves home. *(5)*

*Anything that's going to take me away from my kids is unacceptable. I don't like the idea of latch-key kids, letting themselves in, fixing themselves a snack, doing their homework in isolation, waiting for mom and dad to get back. It's something I find abhorrent, she says. I feel very sorry for kids who do it all by themselves when their parents are out. I am a hands-on mom and I will not compromise that, no matter how lucrative and how wonderful a contract may be.*

She wrote and conceived the eight-women led soap *Kittie Party* and its tremendous success has led to her latest venture, a political drama titled *Swaarth* (Self) with a cast of India's top television stars. Having shot the pilot recently, it should air soon.

There are no literary prizes to boast of, and no major awards, but when an influential political magazine gives an honorary award of sorts by listing her among billionaire businessmen, ministers, priests and legendary artists, it must be a vindication... if not a jaw-dropping surprise.

The final word, as always, belongs to Ms De.

*I think it has a lot to do with establishing a track record of credibility and over 30 years, I think I have earned that position, because what I say through my column and my books has reinforced the image of someone who speaks up when she has to. There may be times*
when what I’m saying is not very palatable, but I’ve always exercised my right to say it, say it responsibly and to say it strongly, says Ms. De, trying to fathom why her sharpest critics eulogized her after three decades of verbal vitriol.

So you always get people who don't agree with you. Dissent is very much part of democracy and I'm completely OK with that, but once you attain a certain level of influence, to be able to sustain it for a decade or more needs a lot of hard work. It needs a great deal of genuine commitment to what you’re doing and you must be able to stand up and be counted.

The Creative World of Shobhaa De:

Shobhaa De is essentially a writer with difference, especially among Indian women writers. She concentrates on women’s problems and gives a new approach to them. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against a male domination. For this, she explores the world of urban women in India. Though some critics see her in the Indian context, Ms De does not fit in the scheme of Indian women writers, neither her female characters. One is tempted to compare her with foreign female writers like Margaret Atwood and Gloria Naylor. Thematically Shobhaa De’s novels are highly complex. They offer sufficient stuff to the critics to interpret them in varied ways. She gives vivid picture of the society and culture of the high society of contemporary India. Her female protagonists are remarkable, when measured against men. She shatters man-woman’s complementary image completely in all her novels. She has been many things to many people: super model, celebrity journalist, prose writer, T.V. script-writer and best – selling author. Shobhaa De is the most eminent, popular and versatile writer of the present times. As a writer, she has an extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human relationship in general and man woman relationship in particular. Her fiction/writing has got huge response not only in India but all over the world. All classes of people read her novels. It is a great achievement, as a novelist. Ms De is not only a novelist but she is also a columnist, essayist, short story writer, letter-writer and an autobiographer. Ms De writes only about urban life in her novels. The themes of her novels are only of elite people. She writes superbly about these people, as she has
intimate knowledge of their life-style. She does not write about rural class like Kamala Markandeya or about middle class like Nayantara Sehgal and Sashi Deshpande. Her novels have women protagonists, and they are neo-rich, educated, economically independent and aristocrat women depicted by writers like Namita Gokhale. Ms De reveals the hedonistic aspect of her characters - male and female. They believe in the philosophy of Omar Khaiyyam: drink, eat and enjoy-all the luxuries of life. If there is a religious element in the character of Anjali (Socialite Evenings), it is pretentious. The novels of Shobhaa De reveal that there are two major thematic threads artistically woven in them and they are the feminist concerns and the realistic pictures of the upper middle class women and men of the Mumbai metro. She has confessed that she writes with a great deal of empathy toward women, without waving the feminist flag. One can support this view as it is reflected in her ‘Selective Memory: Stories from My Life’. Ms De asks her daughter Arundhati: “How would you describe your mother?” She thought for a bit and replied, “Traditional”. She writes: **Now I’d heard it all. Really, really heard it all. I smiled a private smile. I’d finally met someone a canny twelve-year-old-who knew me, who had guessed my secret.** (Selective Memory, Penguin Books India, 1998, p. 531). As all the novels by Ms De have women as main characters, men have a little role to play. They play the second fiddle. They are only instrumental, for example: Jamie Phillips in Starry Nights, Binny in Sisters, Deb in Sultry Days, and Ranjan in Second Thoughts. The archetypal Indian males in her novels are in the murkiest colors. Though realistic, Ms De’s novels do not have a classic touch. Many critics describe her novels as a ‘pulp’ literature. Once, her photograph appeared on the front page of Time and it described her as ‘Jackie Collins of India’. But she did not like it. She says, **I can respond to it on auto cruise. It is a tag I’ve learned to live with-uneasily, of course. But it no longer gets my back up.** As ‘sex’, ‘booze’, ‘corporate conspiracy’, ‘jealousy’ and ‘female domination’ are all pervading in Shobhaa De’s novels, there is a very little scope for ethics and morality in them. Her ‘bed-scenes’ are more ‘porn’ than ‘romantic’. There is a vulgar depiction of sex-scenes. The language also becomes vulgar, naturally. Though Ms De is a good, balanced and realistic writer, she cannot cross the upper middle class border. She cannot avoid her temptation towards the elite class. She narrates their stories superbly, as she is a good raconteur. Her first novel Socialite Evenings is about the prominent
Mumbai socialite Karuna whose journey starts from a gauche middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Her second novel *Starry Nights* is the story of a film star Asha Rani who comes of the rural background to the tinsel world of Bombay and after struggling for some time she becomes a star. *Sisters* is the story of two sisters, Mallika and Alisha, set in the fabulous, intriguing and deceptive world of business tycoons. The story of *Strange Obsession* revolves around the life of lesbian relationship of two young women, Amrita and Meenakshi. *Sultry Days* has the story of Nisha and her friend Deb. In this novel Ms De depicts the modern life-style of neo-rich people and the defeat of communist philosophy. In *Snapshots*, Ms. De reveals the sex-life of six girls of Santa Maria High School. *Second Thoughts* is the seventh and the last novel by Ms De. It is the story of a young middle class Bengali girl Maya who marries a Bombay-based and foreign returned Bengali boy, Ranjan. Maya is more fascinated and in love with Bombay than Ranjan. After marriage her disillusionment begins. In all her novels, Ms De describes sex openly and frankly. There is no-holds-bar exposition. Her sex descriptions are unveiled as her women are unveiled. She depicts all kinds of sex activities: heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, sodomy, fellatio, cunnilingus and masturbation, that is sex-in-all direction, foursquare- sex. So she is the writer with difference and happens to be the pioneer and unconventional in Indian writing in English. Her characters seem to be leading toward primitiveness, but in the guise of modernity. One can describe this trend as a ‘neo-primitivism’. One can say that Shobhaa De is now not only confined to the Indian writers’ world but she is now the global writer because her novels are appreciated in the Western countries, too. However, Ms. De’s novels represent and depict only 2% people in India and not the masses. One feels, while studying her novels, that her women are ‘men’ in the body of women. Ms De is not only an expert in ‘woman’ psychology but also ‘human psychology. Though Freud has divided human psychology as ‘male psychology’ and ‘female psychology’, the researcher’s guide, denies this division as outdated. According to him, there cannot be anything like ‘the male-mind’ and ‘the female-mind’. (He said while opining on the female characters of Shobhaa De.) Though men and women both are prone to deviation, Ms De’s female-protagonists are more prone to deviation. However, the novelist does not suggest any solution to the predicament of her heroines nor they themselves find any solution. There are no villains in the novels of Ms
De. Her heroines are themselves villainous, because they are psychic, abnormal and maniac. There is not any external force (except in *Sisters*); their inner force is responsible for what they face.

**Multifaceted Shobhaa De and dynamism in her work**

1. **Shobhaa De a model**: In the beginning of her career, she worked as a model and made a name for herself. It was very difficult for her to make her career in modeling because the society and surrounding from where she belongs was orthodox. Indian society must have been then and more so her community and one wonders what kind of resistance she must have put up with to make a foray into the world of modeling! Her father resisted the idea of modeling in too! She could have become what he wanted some bureaucrat or a government secretary in the Ministry of Law but she didn't want to. Her brother became an engineer, one of her sisters became an ophthalmic surgeon and the other completed her M.A. in law (now in New York) so very naturally, her family expected her to follow a well-charted path of academics. Her father was keen for her to get into the I.A.S but that was never an option for her. She could never, ever, dream of ending up as some assistant collector in Dhule!

A slender frame, aquiline features, high-cheek bones, not to forget the oozing confidence did all that make her a potential avant-garde model? According to her it's always been others who have sensed talent, skills or what you may term it as, in her. Modeling too just happened. She was with her Dad at the Taj they had gone to meet someone -and she was spotted by an individual from the modeling fraternity. Her innate skills have always been identified by others more than herself being conscious about it. She modeled for the most prestigious brands, like *Khatau Saris*, *Taj Tea* (what Zakir Hussain endorses today) *Ponds, Bombay Dyeing*, all the top brands!

While on the way to becoming a model, Shobhaa faced many strange people and strange events. She was youngest of the women chosen and had to model exquisite *Banarasi Sarees*. It was a kind of ego trip. One of them was a wealthy married socialite. It was an opportunity for the lady to display her splendid body. The
Shobhaa De experienced an ugly side of the modeling business, for example, wine-drinking women and keeping illicit relations. One of them even went away with costly Banarasi Saree, which was borrowed from the shop. She saw beauty queens with dirty toe nails and ramp mannequins with oily pigtails. Though she was the part of this world, she did not belong to it. She remained on its fringes, watching, laughing and learning. It was possible then to work in that artificial, almost unreal environment without losing one’s perspective or a sense of humour. Other girls concentrated on becoming swans while Shobhaa chose to be a fawn. It was hard for her to take modeling business seriously, because she did not see herself as a sleek, sexy, soignée creature of collective fantasy. She did not possess the prerequisites for such a high visibility job, as she thought that time.

Shobhaa endorsed the most celebrated brands way back then and she did that for almost 6 years until she was 22 years. When queried about a natural progression to Bollywood, she did receive every conceivable offer to act in Bollywood, but acting per se never attracted her. She enjoyed modeling not so much of 'ramp' though she did quite a few shows but 'still' photography was what she was most comfortable with. According to her she would never be comfortable in films though she had been approached by the likes of both, Bengal and even Satyajit Ray.

She described happiness as the most effective cosmetic in the world which makes us to glow and to be great.

2. **Journalist in Shobhaa De:** Then, she pursued her career in Journalism. After making her name as a model, she began a career in journalism in 1970, during the course of which she founded and edited three magazines - *Stardust, Society,* and *Celebrity.* *Stardust* magazine is published by Mumbai-based Magna Publishing Co. Ltd. and was started by Nari Hira in 1971. It became popular under the editorship of noted journalist, author and columnist, Shobhaa De. In the 1980s, she contributed to the Sunday magazine section of *The Times of India.* In her columns, she used to explore the socialite life in Mumbai, lifestyles of the celebrities. Presently, she is
working as a freelance writer for a couple of newspapers and magazines. Most of her writings focus on different aspects of urban India. Her columns are like her books: tangy, wacky, interesting, sleazy, sometimes satirical and unconventional.

3 **Shobhaa De a script writer:** She has also been actively involved in writing scripts for various TV soaps like Swabhimaan. When I wrote Swabhimaan in the mid-nineties, I wasn't at all sure how a daily soap revolving around the life of a mistress would fly on a national channel. Frankly, I was rather amazed it had been accepted in the first place. Nearly three years and over six hundred odd episodes later, I was pleasantly reassured by the positive response, particularly to the lead character, Svetiana, played convincingly by Kitu Gidwani. Today, when I write for television, I do so with far more confidence. I know it's possible to shift the goal posts and raise the bar. I know audiences will accept newness and contemporary themes (the success of Saans is a case in point). I know there'll be a sizeable number of viewers responsive to the attitudinal shifts being projected by popular serials.

4 **Shobhaa De a columnist:** In the 1980s, she contributed to the Sunday magazine of *The Times of India*. A feminist, she supported equality between genders. In her column she used to explore the socialite life in Bombay and many of the hypocrisies of the celebrities.

5 **Shobhaa De a periodical writer:** As a columnist and writer for a fortnight magazine *The Week* she writes on varied issues concerning the society. She speaks her mind in her writings. She often expresses her dissatisfaction with respect to the behavior exhibited by the present day generation. Many a times, she has been held responsible for accelerating the pace and bringing about a sexual revolution through her writings in the column *The Sexes* of the magazine *The Week*.

6 **Shobhaa De a novelist:** Her novels, racy and raunchy in style and content, are trashed by serious critics, but the numbers they sell make her one of the most widely read English novelists in India. Her first novel was *Socialite Evenings* and her very first venture was a best seller. She has also written some more novels like
Starry Nights, Sisters, Second Thoughts and many more. Shobhaa De is known for her bold and frank style of writing. Feminism, its various aspects and gender equality of the society are the main themes of writing of Shobhaa De. She mainly deals with issues concerning the modern society. She also focuses on the different facets of the urban Indian society. She attempts to project the large society as a whole through her characters. For instance, in her novel Socialite Evenings, she explored the lives of the bored housewives and their loveless life of rich industrialist families. This book was critically acclaimed and it is still considered as a masterpiece. In her novel Starry Nights, this prominent novelist portrays the love story of two popular celluloid stars. It is the story of high class people and it wonderfully depicts the dark side of the Hindi film industry. Shobhaa De illustrates the different characters of her books in a very beautiful and interesting way. She wonderfully presents a picture of a fragmentary world to her readers. The women characters of her novel are shown madly in love with the male characters. Love, jealousy and manipulation are the prominent themes of Shobhaa De`s books. For her writing style and indifferent themes, Shobhaa De is labeled as a `feminist writer` of Indian English literature. In her novels, Shobhaa De speaks her mind. Her novels are hugely popular and are critically appreciated.

Shobhaa De as a blogger: Blogging happened in April 2008. It began as a promotional idea for her book Superstar India. She found it most liberating and a whole lot of fun. The topics on her blogs vary – it could be a strong comment on a movie, politics, fashion, food, a celeb, an international happening, a social issue… or even her own little discoveries while travelling. For her it is important to connect with those who visit and share her feelings\experiences. It is so liberating! There are no word limits or space constraints. As a writer, she can receive instant feedback from some really sharp minds who are followers. She says she learns a lot from them. Blogs represent creative freedom and she loves that. Blogs are an extension of a blogger’s personality. She treats followers with respect at all times. She says, Don’t abuse the space by using it to settle personal scores or parade your vanities.
Shobhaa De as a designer: Columnist and writer Shobhaa De also turned into a designer. She made her debut in Mumbai with a collection of lovely saris. From bestselling author to designer—Shobhaa De has made the transition with practiced ease. Her new role as designer sees her giving a spin to the traditional with her cocktail saris collection. Shobhaa believes that a woman looks most beautiful and elegant in a sari and hence her collection strives to maintain just that. The switch from wordsmith to designer says Shobhaa, is seamless. *I believe that writing and designing require more or less the same skills. Only the application of those skills is different. You need imagination, discipline, hard work, you need to be observant, need to be interested in life itself to be able to create something beautiful,* said Shobhaa. So is Shobhaa better as a writer or a designer? No surprise that most came to the rescue of the author known for her razor-sharp columns. The famous designer Ritu Beri said *Shobhaa De is everything that any lady would like to be. The elegant lady has poise, charm, persona, confidence, personality and above all a very positive attitude which makes her glow at any event or function she graces, radiating absolute charm.* Shobhaa De, the enigmatic and charming novelist, who has always managed to sweep book lovers off their feet with each of her novels, walked the ramp for friend Ritu Beri, fashion icon of India. Shobhaa De even at 60 plus has a great penchant for looking her best, exudes definite style and grace, and can be surely called the ultimate woman of contemporary India.

And Many More Aspects of Shobhaa De:

Shobhaa De has seen it all: life model, a copywriter, a journalist, a socialite, a scriptwriter, a novelist, a busy mother among other things, and will continue to make or report news. She was in sports, modeling, books, and of late, saree designing. Shobhaa had passion for athletics and painting. In short she is multi talented. De launched her line of designer saris a few years ago and has now partnered with Penguin to publish books under her own imprint: Shobhaa De Books. Her books such as *Socialite Evenings* and *Sultry Days*, were launched by Simon & Schuster in Britain and have been translated and published along with a couple of others in Italian and Korean! One - *Starry Nights* - is a bestseller in Hindi as well. Shobhaa De was a protégé of Nari Hira, who gave her a break.
as editor of their film magazine *Stardust*. And Shobhaa De shot to fame in the showbiz by writing about Bollywood stars and their personal lives. She was prefixed as the rebel but now her writings sound matronly. Now and then she splutters with rage over the misdoings of the younger generations. She can be held responsible for the speeding up of the pace of sexual revolution in India with her sensuous novels. Obviously, she is a bestselling writer and her work is market based. Nevertheless, she is a writer with a mission. She has unfurled the hidden recesses of human mind like a true psychologist. Her degree in psychology has undoubtedly helped her to understand the true human nature. She is straightforward in her dealings and never appears a snob. In 1998, at the age of 50 she published her life-story entitled *Stories from My Life*. A marriage manual entitled *Spouse* offers her prudent views on marriage as an institution and a collection of the letters written by De to her kids is a luminous record of guidelines to the posterity. *S’s Secret* is her recently published work.

Shobhaa De has been many things to many people. Her high voltage career happened in unexpected ways: right from her unplanned entry as a teenager into the glamorous world of modeling to her high profile years as a magazine editor, columnist, TV script writer and author. In these incarnations she minutely observed the upcoming India. She has depicted this brash, affluent ambitious India with an altogether distinct touch in her memoir- *Selective Memory*. Thus, De had carved a niche of bold women writing. However, the literary world termed her a Jackie Collins of India and she became popular as a queen of pornography. None was able to understand the beauty of various human ties which she wove in her writings. To her, physical love is a key to spiritual realization. So what if society doesn’t approve her ideas. As a writer she was not worried about social approval but she was concerned about the approval of her husband, kids and the family members. Dilip always stood by her. Her children were too small to react during the publication of her earlier writings. It was the tact and insight of her husband that gave her the strength to bear the critics’ attacks. Recalling the hard-times of critical attacks and her husband’s warm response, Shobhaa De observes: *Dilip would always make light of the whole thing and successfully blunted the edge of the unrelenting attacks. When I look back, it couldn’t have been easy for him, husband of a woman the entire critic’s community had dubbed pornographer*. Whatsoever, it may be, De, as a writer, achieved
a grand success. Shobhaa De belongs to the post-colonial Indian woman writers who have become more innovative, experimental, confessional and realistic than they were ever before. De’s life-story is the story of the new woman of independent India. Her self-identification is described in the new ideology. Her combat against the fixed identity of the docile, tortured and conformist woman of pre-independence turns out to be an individual protest under the impact of western culture.

De has scaled heights of success as an Indian woman breaking through rigid barriers.

**Shobhaa De – The queen of controversies**

Shobhaa De is known for speaking her own mind. Her outspoken and forthright comments have put her into a lot of controversy. Though her stint with the magazines and papers got her into the lime light, it was her controversial novels which made her an overnight celebrity. The erotic content in her novels attracted much controversy and she was accused of being a ‘soft porn writer’. However, her bold and highly individualistic style of writing made Shobhaa De into one of India’s top bestselling authors. Shobhaa De's novels are featured in the post-graduate popular culture curriculum of the University of London. She has over a dozen Novels to her Credit (all starting with ‘S’ except one). She is also credited to have given birth to Hinglish (a mix of Hindi and English) way of writing. Her novels are *Shobhaa at Sixty: Secrets of Getting it right at any age*, *Sandhya’s Secret*, *Superstar India*, *Strange Obsession*, *Socialite Evenings*, *Snapshots*, *Starry Nights*, *Spouse: The truth about marriage*, *Speed post*, *Surviving Men*, *Selective Memory: Stories from my Life*, *Second Thoughts*, *Small betrayals*, *Shooting from the hip*, *Sultry Days*, *Uncertain Liaisons and Sisters*. This Author was on the list of ‘50 Most Powerful Women in India’ published by the DNA Newspaper in March 2010.

Shobhaa De’s reviews of Bollywood Films also have got her into a lot of controversy. Her negative review for the film Dabangg made the producer of the film Arbaaz Khan made remarks of her as *frustrated sleaze writer* who can give competition to Elizabeth Taylor. Bollywood Actress Sonam Kapoor gave the Writer the title *Wicked Witch of Bollywood* after wrote a bad review of Sonam Kapoor's movie *I Hate Luv Stories* and named it as *I Hate Dumb Stories*. Sonam kapoor attacked the Shobhaa De on the micro
blogging site Twitter by calling her a ‘fossil’. However, the actress later apologized to Ms. De for it. Recently Shobhaa De was all praises for Ekta Kapoor’s Dirty picture and actress Vidya Balan who played the role of Silk. She even predicted that Vidya Balan would win an award for her performance. The latest news is that Shobhaa De is going to write a book about the Bollywood Heroine Kareena Kapoor.

**Shobhaa De that she is:**

A number of recent Indian novelists have produced significant novels, making a mark in the literary world. However, on reading Shobhaa De's novels, one can get some idea about the changing trends in Indian writing in English. Shobhaa De has been many things to many people: super model, celebrity journalist and best-selling author of intellectual prose writings and popular novels; friend, rival, colleague and confidante. In her latest publication *Selective Memory: Stories from my life* (1998, Penguin Books, New Delhi) one comes across her engagingly candid memoir, a woman who has been a familiar face and name to millions (although few know her) and where she finally reveals the true self behind the public persona. Insiders know that despite her commitment to work and the frantic pace of her life, Shobhaa De's first priority in life has always been her family. Starting her career as a model, as a film journalist, as an editor of popular magazines and as a columnist, the world of experience of Ms De is quite rich, varied and extremely fascinating. Her novels bring to our notice characters, incidents, episodes of different kinds of men and women who appear to be real but at the same time foggy and rather thin. She is a lioness, unafraid of male chauvinists, ready to flag humans to the zenith of independence and free will. What is most liked about her is her shyless bold attitude. Shobhaa De’s journey from a model, film journalist, column writer to fiction writer is very thrilling and interesting. It is necessary to see how the persona of Shobhaa De developed step by step. Any great person’s character – building is assessed from the roots. Yet, Ms. De’s biography is not written by any writer. But we have more authentic life-story narrated by Ms. De herself in her autobiography (?): *Selective Memory –Stories from My Life*. It is a matter of dispute whether *Selective Memory* is an autobiography or not because the very title of the book suggests that there are only selective memories from her life. She has omitted some memories, which she does not wish to share with the
readers and critics. But after reading *Selective Memory*, one gets sufficient stuff from the book to know the real self of Shobhaa De. Here, the efforts are not to evaluate the book. The intention is only to present the important aspects of a versatile personality of Shobhaa De. One can divide her saga into five sections: Shobhaa De as a model, as a film journalist and columnist, as an editor of magazines, as an intellectual prose writer and as a novelist.

Any literary work is examined in terms of its theme and style. It depends on an individual what style he or she should apply while writing a novel. Indian female writers have followed the traditional way of writing. But Shobhaa De, a post-Independence woman novelist, has applied her own style while writing her seven novels. It is clear that Ms. De’s style is her own. It means her style is direct, forceful and she calls a spade a spade. She has her own knack of depicting people, events and places. Barring her fifth novel *Sultry Days*, other six novels have exotic settings, characters and places. Only *Sultry Days* is located in Bombay. Beginning her career as a model, film journalist and prose writer has helped her create her own space in the Indian writing in English, particularly, novels. For being a successful writer one requires tremendous command on language, while he/she is going to write. Shobhaa De, though B.A. in psychology, has tremendous command on English. Her keen understanding of human nature, her rich world of experience and her penetrating eyesight in the facts and persons have helped her develop her style. Her style is path-breaking. Not only her style but her themes are also path-finders which try to explore human mind, especially the woman mind. Shobhaa De is an expert in depicting both: the inner as well as the outer mind of her characters. She has deep knowledge of human psyche, especially-women psyche, as she herself is B.A. in psychology. As the author she is herself a globe-trotter, her novels also have a global touch. The setting of her novels is exotic. There are exotic places, people, food items and various brands of wines and cigarettes. If a list is made of the names of food items used by her in all her novels, it will make a menu-card of a five-star hotel. That is the same case with wines, cigarettes and various designer clothes. This is so because her characters belong to a five-star category.
As the name of the author is Shobhaa which begins with the letter “S”, so the titles of her all novels begin with the same letter – “S”: Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sisters, Strange Obsession, Snapshots, Sultry Days and Second Thoughts. To have a passion for a particular letter is also the style of the author as if she is possessed by “S” letter. At 60, nothing seems to have changed for Shobhaa De. She is still tremendously vital, still beautiful, still outspoken and outrageous – and through it all, still one of India’s biggest success stories. The critics love to hate her, but Shobhaa remains one of India’s icons – she has been known to move tens of thousands of books in a matter of days, and her columns have appeared in almost every Indian newspaper and magazine of note.

She was initially best known for her work on Stardust, where as the sly, knowing voice in the column Nita’s Natter, she gave readers the low down on Bollywood. Made editor when she was a mere 23 years old, Shobhaa re-invented the ‘fanzine’ for India, and her fresh perspective made the magazine an instant sensation. Looking back today, she says, that much like herself, Stardust “broke all the rules”. To date, Shobhaa describes herself as a magazine junkie – you can take the woman out of the magazine but you can’t take the magazine out of the woman.

However, her obvious success hasn’t stopped the critics from having their say. With a great love for alliteration, the media bestowed nicknames like the Maharani of Malice, the Empress of Erotica and the Princess of Pulp on the Bombay socialite. But if mocking titles and the scathing reviews have had any effect on Shobhaa, she’s not letting on, in fact, as far as she’s concerned the entire furore is “so predictable”. To say she revels in her non-conformity would be untrue, for Shobhaa, this is simply the way she is. It’s not even something I think about, in my act of writing there is no self consciousness, it is not a performance, and it is not an affectation… this is it, this is the way I write. This is who I am, and who she is continues to fascinate the world.

I feel like, if what I’m doing is not serious enough, then surely the world’s universities wouldn’t be studying me and surely there wouldn’t be over a 100 doctorate thesis and dissertations on my work which are available in libraries around the world she says, adding emphatically, but all that is not my concern, for me it’s as simple as if this is the
book I want to write, than is this the book I want to write. Superstar India, her fifteenth and newest publication, is being billed as a candid and thoroughly readable work. The author says when she realized that the country would be celebrating its sixtieth year of independence the same year that she herself would mark six decades of living, the thought struck her, surely my life has taken the same trajectory as the country’s. Reflecting on the book, she says that while there’s a great deal, including a booming economy and India’s now inevitable superpower status to celebrate, the book isn’t just about a mindless hurrah. I’ve seen a lot of change—some of it good, not all of it good, and the book is a very honest and truthful reflection of that change… some of it pains me, it actively hurts me, and I’m saying, these are things we can do something about… Why aren’t we doing it?

Describing her journey from being a middle-class girl with a lot of aspirations in life to becoming a bestselling author as “exciting”, Shobhaa De has no qualms calling herself a feminist. The lady, who has depicted women as epitomes of power, liberty and beauty in her books, says there should be no word like ‘compromise’ in the dictionary for women. The author, whom critics love to hate, has always had a penchant for writing steamy books, her feminist side coming to the fore, as the female protagonists in her books love to flaunt their dark, sensuous sides, and are a far cry from the female image that the male-dominated country wants to see in the society. Moreover, her books have always revolved around the lives of the rich and the famous.

Shobhaa De presents women protagonists who blatantly denounce the validity of the existing social norms and rebel against the moral codes, which deny freedom to women. These women protagonists are conscious of their emotional needs and consequently clamour for a change of social order. They herald a new morality that demands accommodation of individual desires for self-fulfilment. Emancipation to them is not confined to the realms of social and economic freedom. It is more the freedom of mind that seeks to assert itself, one that will not deter them from self fulfillment. Shobhaa De portrayed a tinsel world of glamour depicting the Indian upper middle class milieu without any inhibition. The characters are economically independent and socially uninhibited; and a growing consciousness of their self respect prompts them into
competent professionals working on par with their male counterparts. Women, though in the beginning they strongly speak in favor of the institution of marriage. The women’s role in a society, particularly her role in the family and her emergence from the conventional stereotyped to the rebellious and new woman is the focus of this study. Such a study becomes relevant in an Indian context where the family is still an integral unit and sacred institution. The analysis seems to launch on new revelations. It is undeniable that feminism had awakened the self-awareness in women. The newly ushered in awareness had considerably altered women’s roles, and these altered roles have accelerated immense social transformations. On the one hand, they valorized the new woman, and on the other had been looked up with much suspicion as they may endanger the family unit. The Indian women novelists in general and Shobhaa De in particular have attempted to delineate the vast changes that are coming up in society.\(^6\) These writers subvert the masculine norm in the patriarchal culture and re establishes the feminine as the positive individual. This article seeks to examine the select novels of Shobhaa De in the light of the concept of the New Woman where the protagonists achieve personhood as a priority rather than negate their self for the family and the society; they find their own voices. The last two decades have seen the emergence of writers of controversial merit like Shobhaa De who present her versions of the newly liberated women and who demand attention. In one sense, the women writers have sensed the state of flux within the new bourgeois society they belong to. Their narratives, their characters and their language are part of a pattern that emerges whenever a social order changes, when suppressed voices find utterance and a new world opens. Clearly the new urban female with her insistent sexuality is finding utterance, but the experiences of underprivileged women still remain largely blocked off from the Indian novel in English. Lastly as different from the women protagonists depicted by the earlier women novelists, the women characters of Shobhaa De are economically independent and socially emancipated. Like the males the women characters stress their sexual freedom and clamour for a women’s universe.\(^7\)

**Shobhaa and Bollywood:**
There are a few simple reasons why the author Shobhaa De has been referred to as the Indian Jackie Collins - namely, shopping and sex. Take this scene from her latest book, Bollywood Nights, just published in the UK, and featuring the heroine Aasha Rani, a sultry Indian actor:

The Thai girls asked her flirtatiously whether she wanted to try a 'sandwich massage'. Game to try anything once, Aasha Rani agreed readily. It was an experience so sensuous, so arousing, so complete, that it was weeks before she could forget [it] ... When she returned to Bombay a fortnight later she had with her two VCRs, two CDs, enough makeup to fill three trunks, and had experienced some of the greatest orgasms of her life.

I've arranged to meet De at the Langham hotel in London, and I watch as India's first lady of sauciness swishes down the steps wearing a black and white zebra-print sari, a very large cocktail ring and carrying a quilted gold bag. With her long glossy hair and perfect accessories she looks much more like a leading lady than a 59-year-old mother of six - in fact, she resembles her heroines.

To many in the west, Indian fiction is characterized by large mournful tomes about families and feelings, written by such authors as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Rohinton Mistry. To them, De's work will come as a shock. She's been a bestselling writer in India for many years and her books have been known to shift 10,000 copies in three days. They describe a side of the country that western audiences rarely encounter, her central themes being power, greed, lust and sex. In Bollywood Nights, Aasha Rani becomes very successful in a film industry laced with scandal, before falling in love with a sleazy married actor - a relationship that threatens to wreck her reputation.

Is Bollywood really so scandalous? It can't be airbrushed, De says. It can't be made antiseptic with a Dettol wash. Bollywood is brutal, show business is brutal, and I'm telling it like it is, warts and all. It is the underbelly that in a way defines what Bollywood actually is but rarely wants to acknowledge about itself.

And while her books seem at odds with the family entertainment produced by Bollywood, the industry doesn't spurn De as some sort of renegade. In fact, for many
years she's had a very close relationship with it - as well as being the author of bonk busters, she's the pioneer of modern Indian celebrity journalism.

Born in 1948 in the state of Maharashtra, De is the youngest of four children, and her father was a district judge (she describes her background as "solidly upper middle class"). At 17 she became a model, and by the time she was 23 she had founded her own celebrity magazine, Stardust, a monthly fix of Bollywood gossip, including exclusive interviews, scandalous tittle-tattle and photo shoots of all the latest heartthrobs wearing very few clothes. As editor of one of the first magazines to cover the Indian film industry, De soon became a household name in India, with Stardust also gaining a cult following internationally.

She denies that Rani, her current heroine, is based on any one actor: *Let's put it this way, there is a pattern to Bollywood and it follows its own sort of logic.* Off-screen, as well as on, *nubile young ladies from south India fall for Punjabi hunks from Delhi. So it isn't actually based on any one character - it's a composite of a lot of women I've seen pass through the Bollywood portals.*

And what about the hunks? Has she dated any actors herself? She looks shocked and coquettish at the same time. *No, no, no. I'm sorry, but it's just not true. It would be a total lie for me to even suggest something like that.* In her youth, she did get a lot of very attractive movie offers ... *but it took me under 10 seconds to say a very resolute no.*

De likes to say that she exposes Bollywood, lays bare its secrets. But she often seems intoxicated by the glamour she claims to strip away. *Bollywood spins by its own set of rules and nobody really wants to completely deconstruct it,* she admits. *You don't want to disillusion a lot of people out there - for more than 350 million of whom Bollywood remains a hugely seductive dream.*

When it comes to British celebrities, she often can't understand why they're celebrated at all. She's met Liz Hurley a few times *socially in Mumbai. It just astonished me that there could be this level of interest in her - after all, she's not Madonna. There is something very peculiarly British in the obsession they have over certain people ... We cannot*
understand the Kate Moss phenomenon; we cannot understand the Victoria Beckham phenomenon. We don't see the attributes in them that make them so iconic. And we certainly don't see it in Liz Hurley. We see her as a very, very ordinary and not particularly riveting figure.

India is hot right now, she announces. Her books were among the first few to reflect a contemporary India, rather than be focused on the clichés surrounding India. They were not books about the depression and repression, and they were not about women who were suffering, they were not about poverty. Instead they're about attitude, so perfectly in tune with the zeitgeist that more than a hundred doctorates have been written about them.

If there's one thing above all others that, in De's mind, is a cliché, it's the idea that Indian society includes religious zealots of any kind. When asked if anyone has ever protested about her sexually explicit writing, she reacts almost as if her country has been insulted. I just feel that there are too many value judgments made about India based on nothing more than sometimes very prejudiced reporting in the western media ... I think we have done brilliantly. Why not focus on the positives, why not focus on the fact that we are self-sufficient in every area including food? We're way beyond the cliche of the Taj Mahal, land of the snake charmers and the elephant boys, tigers prowling the streets.
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