Chapter IV

Shobha De:  Dare All  Bare All

Shobha De is one of the most popular Indian novelists and a short story writers of the present time. One of the highest selling Indian authors, Shobha De is queen of Indian Fiction. She was born in Maharashtra in 1948 and was educated in Delhi and Mumbai. She graduated from St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai with a degree in psychology. The year 1970 marks the turning point in the life of Shobha De with a friend at Creative Unit, a modest advertising agency, she was asked a question – “Can you write”? (1998: 84) it was a question that changed the whole coarse of her life and gave her a new location. In “why I write”, (1994:xi) De observes:

I write because I love writing. I write because I like the feel of paper under my ball-point pen. Writing is pure sex. I like to see a blank sheet fill up. I like to think while my fingers move. I like the way words jump around inside my head impatiently like they can’t wait to pop out and born.

Shooting From The Hip: p.2.

This is how she turned to writing. She became dreaded editor of the Bollywood Magazine namely Stardust, and later founded Society, Celebrity and was consulting editor to Sunday and Megacity. She earned name and fame and at present she is as a free-lance writer and columnist for several leading newspapers and magazines. Her writings has cut across caste, class, age, sex, race and religion, and captivated the entire nation. Media and journalism made her style and language mature. While living in cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai, she observed beastly human tendencies in and around. Therefore her sound and fury against such evil tendencies reflected
in her writings are not devoid of meaning. The story of her life is the story of New-Woman of the post Independence India.

Shobha de has been many things to many people: a super model, celebrity, film journalist, magazine editor, wife, mother, nonfiction and fiction writer, serious newspapers columnist and eventually as a social commentator, T.V. script writer, anchor-woman and social magnate. But above all she is the most popular Indian woman writer writing in English. Her writing consists of novels, short stories, letters, essays and an autobiography. Shobha De is the author of fourteen books. Her fictional output consists of seven novels. She appeared on the Indian literary seen with the publication of her first novel Socialite Evenings in 1988. Her other novels are Starry Nights (1990), Sisters (1992) Sultry Days (1940), Strange Obsession (1992), Snapshots (1995) and Second Thoughts (1996). As a creative writer she occupies a significant place in the history of Indian Novel in English. Out of her colossal collection, a suitable range of De’s works has been carefully selected and arranged in the volume Shooting from The Hip (1994) and Small Betrayals (1955). De ventures to experiment with other genres of literature. In the former she deals with essay writer of which she has been a past master as a journalist. While in the latter she handles the technique of the short story. Her non-fictional work: Surviving Men: The Smart Women’s Guide to Staying on Top (1997) made her a controversial writer. Here she writes frankly about taboo ridden topic of male sexuality. The publication of the latest work, Selective Memory: Stories from My Life (1998) an autobiography which is a landmark in the literary carrier of De. It gives the reader an ample opportunity to know the author more intimately. Her recent non-
fiction *Spouse: The Truth About Marriage* (2005) and *Superstar India* (2008) has certainly evolved her as a sensitive women writer. The modern Indian woman at the core of her fiction is the most important feature of her writing.

One of the major reasons of Shobha De’s popularity as a writer of fiction is her intimate understanding of the psyche of woman and her problems, and one may add, her potentials. Her treatment of the contemporary urban woman’s position and the challenges she faces is vehement and full of abandon. She usually projects the image of the upper class woman of contemporary India because she knows the class from first hand experience. She is gifted writer having an extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really breathtaking. De’s writing gained popularity for their open approach towards the woman’s world and the graphic depiction of her pursuits and experiences. Her works also represent the portrayal of the urban middle class woman who in quest of her identity undergoes a metamorphosis from a silent sufferer to a hard core rebel breaking with the age-old and restraining morality of the male dominated world. She intends to heal treatment of sex in marital bliss and sex as a curse. The research work, therefore is to provide certain clues for a better understanding of the marital life. At times rebellion of an woman takes an extreme form such as sexual promiscuity, extra-marital relations which serve as a device for her to assert her “self” and it is this theme of self-assertion and identity which is found in the short stories of Shobha De.

This chapter attempts to make compressive critical comments on short stories of Shobha De, with an emphasis on the man-woman relationship.
portrayed in her stories. It is also intended to show how De is different from other Indian women writers in English. Since it seeks to explore and explicate overall universal relationship appearing in the stories, it would be a fascinating study from Indian point of view. Shobha De is versatile in her writings and touches upon different areas like politics, media, food festivals, films, books, people, travelogues and a lot more. Here an attempt has been made to have a bird’s eye view of her volume *Shooting From The Hip* (1994) which consists of fourteen major titles, including “Susheela’s Secret,” De’s first short story.

The story “Susheela’s Secret” is about a married woman Susheela who has an affair with Mr. Deshpande, her boss. She says that woman like her should not have affairs. It is not because she is not glamorous or sexy. It is not that she is married, mother to her son Ashwin who turned eight years old and that she has husband by name Milind. But she states that she is not only married but quite happily married even compared to her neighbour Usha. She wonders about Mr. Deshpande’s liking towards her. She goes to Pune with her boss for an official tour and as expected, he makes advances to her in the hotel room. Mr. Deshpande walked in a little unsteady manner, pulled out a small bottle of liquor and asked her to fetch a glass.

As she sat on the bed staring at her naked boss, she is little confused and wonders “If all men were basically the same and they did it more or less the same way and said more or less the same things – then why do women have affairs? Why not stick to just one fellow? Thinking like this, I started to sing softly to myself.” (p.317) Mr. Deshpande was snoring and she took out the mangalsutra from her purse and wears it again. “I was feeling happy. And relieved. As if some, big mystery had been solved for me. In a way.”
suppose it had. I knew I wasn’t missing anything. Not really. Next time with Milind would be easy. And the next. And next” (p.318) Susheela, the protagonist of her maiden story also confesses her hidden desire to have sex with men other than her husband. She says “I would … Mr. Deshpande by my side”. (p.4) Here she attempts to break loose from the traditional sexual conventions. Finally she has it with her boss Mr. Deshpande.

Susheela, the protagonist is certainly different from the sexually ignorant Indian woman as described by Khushwant Singh and other Indian writers. Khushwant Singh represents an old age view about Indian women: “This is all most Indian women know of sex – an unpleasant subjection to men’s desire - necessary in order to have sons, bearable because of its brevity (Khushwant Singh 1959, pp 42-43) But De antagonizes this very forcefully in her works. Her females challenge the traditional set up of the society. In course of breaking social traditions and conventions, they establish sexual relations with other men without any feeling of guilt.

Hence, Susheela appears to be rebellious modern Indian woman who challenge the orthodoxy of sexual and social taboos. The institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of the people of India. It makes a point of maturity and signifies the flowering of life. History proves that marriage is essential for the well being of human society and that celibacy brings ruin upon states. The institution of marriage has provided for the society’s need for love, security and children. Educated and attractive confident and assertive socialite women in De’s writing define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death is replaced generally by sexual freedom. The change in attitude towards marriage represents, according to
De “a big step forward” (p.40). She tears to pieces all notion of respectability associated with marriage. Her women discuss and practice sex with unusual contour. All sexual taboos are broken by them with gusto. Simon De Beauvoir finds man-woman nexus quite unsymmetrical and uncomplimentary for “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity” (Simon de Beauvoir, 1974, p.85)

In the publication of her volume Small Betrayals, De has explored the average experiences of betrayal in its infinite variety and reached the core of uncertainties and complexities of life that never dissolve and resolve completely. In this collection there are fourteen stories out of which eleven stories reflect the man-woman relationship. The stories of this collection are not of equal merit. Either the male or the female point of view is normally projected, but occasionally, both the views are juxtaposed. All the stories introduce rapid remodulation of circumstances to explode illusions and establish reality. One is pleasantly surprised by De’s clinical interpretation of human nature. Shobha De has viewed the conflicts and contradictions of human existence from multiple angles especially the following stories are best example of man-woman relationship.

The story “The Motor cycle” outlines the unfulfilled expectations of a young couple confined and rooted in their respective cultures. Pesi, the protagonist was the Parsee colony’s pampered bachelor boy. He was single till his fifty-first birthday and when he wanted to get married, he chose a Hindu bride Mohini. Compared to Pesi, she was only nineteen years old.
People had always envied him. He had a nice, big subsidized house belonging to his old parents, a doting mama who fed him with his favourite foods every day. It was an easy life for him with no responsibilities and no problems. He had just one passion in life-old cars and motor-bikes. Mohini thinks that she is the garage owner but he tells that he is the owner’s friend. Pesi’s romance with Mohini moved at a pace that surprised everybody, including Pesi. He told that he loves her and if she’s not interested, she can say no but to his surprise, Mohini leaned forward and took his hand in her own. “And what if I say ‘Yes’”? (p.14) Pesi swing around and lifted her up into the air with happiness.

Pesi looked across at Mohini, radiant and glowing. They performed a registered marriage. Everybody clapped and Mohini took out two garlands made out of dried leaves. Here the cultural differences erupted since Parsees exchange garlands but there were strung from flowers made of spider lilies and roses. Before they could celebrate, she visited the temple. He then tried to make the freshly applied sindoor a little more symmetrical way. But she became angry and asked him to behave in a proper manner. Pesi stared down at his toes and when he saw her stepping into her strappy shoes, comfortably in a strange surrealistic setting, background, he thought to himself “Pesi Ayboatwallah, had made a major blunder” (p.21) and embittered Mohini flinks back, “I thought you were different that’s why I married you” (p.21) Pesi much against the wishes of his tradition bond parents, married a girl from different religion. On the other hand, Mohini’s glamour of her liberated ways wanes within the first day of their married life. He realizes that a wife is very different from a motor cycle.
Hence De should be given due credit for etching the ethos of the Parsee culture though it is not her primary concern. Her intention is to reconstruct the tragedy of life through the confrontation of two cultures, both destroying and nourishing. Pesi and Mohini become victims of trifling cultural rituals leading to destruction of conjugal life.

The story “The Fair One” reveals that Mr.Godbole’s erotic fantasy about his Parsee neighbour is not the cause but the effect of his wife’s temporary rejection of his sexual needs. Godbole finished his shaving and looked across her bedroom door. The curtains were still well-drawn and he thought that she was a late riser. He wondered about her life with the balding, bespectacled man with whom she shared her home. He thought she did not look like a doctor’s wife. Godbole was not a good-looking man but he had medium height with an average built up. His wife Indu was a simple woman. They had been married for fifteen years and it was an arranged marriage. Sometimes he stayed by the mirror, for few minutes to catch the glimpse of the ‘Fair One’. He could not bear to leave his home without a final glimpse of her and at the same time he could not bear his wife’s wrath.

Once he asked Indu, his wife whether she has noticed the woman in the next building. He enquired even the minute details about her through his wife. He was certain that she was dissatisfied with her husband. They looked mismatched. He imagined how could that clumsy man keep her happy and contended.

On Sunday he would position himself on an arm-chair near the balcony and pretend to read the papers. Indu always misunderstood his intentions. Godbole had withdrawn into himself avoiding even a passing touch and
going to the extent of shrinking away while walking the narrow passage that led from their room to the bathroom. Later Godbole forgot all about his resolve. One night, after a small victory in the office, he came home feeling like *Atlas* and longing to boast about his triumphs. For a change, Indu was receptive and attentive. Dinner had been delayed that night so that Godbole could watch a T.V. programme. She even gave him an extra cup of tea. Later, she went near her husband and without any comment, he patted his wife’s forehead. He held her face between his hands and kissed her first on her left cheek and then on her right. As he reached her to switch off the light, he glanced out the ‘Fair One’s’ room for a reflex action. He saw her clearly brushing her hair in quick angry strokes. Godbole turned away because there was nothing left to see. He turned off the lights and went back to his bed. It was warm and welcoming. The light across the compound was still on when Godbole finally went to bed. Suddenly it had become just another light. “Some poor insomniac’s little beacon. It had nothing to do with him. Nothing at all” (p.37).

The story reflects the over-worked wife’s frigidity which makes the husband feel alienated, unwanted and distanced from his regular bearings. To overcome the feeling of neglect, he indulges in aphrodisiac reveries, a process of wish fulfillment. Godbole’s behavior has Freudian overtones though there is no inkling of “egoistic and ambitious wishes” asserting itself. His wife’s return to the role of Rambha, settles everything happily. Despite the alluring lady’s presence in the opposite flat, Godbole contentedly “Turned the lights out and went back to his bed”. (p.37)
In this story Shobha De skims over the details of imaginative or real erotic behavior. It is treated as something secondary. Her emphasis is on the repurcussions of sexual starvation. She never wishes to judge her creatures and yet there is a suggestion of man’s vulnerability and woman’s power. Hence the traditional sex-role channeling of both men and women is detrimental to men, women, and society. In order for the female role to become a human role, the male role must also become a human role.

The story “The Decision” frames a marital discord that fundamentally springs from rebellious Manisha who demands equity in marriage. Manisha’s loving but ambitious husband desires to migrate to America the dream-world. Manisha is content with her bank job, did not like the idea. She feels betrayed because Mohan disregards her feelings and desires. Her decision is “I am not going” (p.51) even if it means divorce. When she made her face crest fallen, Mohan told her that it would be a new life and more money. But Manisha was enjoying her job at the bank. Her relationship with her mother improved and the servants had finally settled into a workable groove. She made friends with her neighbours. And she was ready to have a baby. Manisha hated the whole idea and was wondering how he could take a unilateral decision. She liked living in India because she felt secure and comfortable.

Manisha knew she was being too hard because she herself encouraged him to apply. She was also excited during his preliminary interviews. She realises that she should have spoken to him then. According to Manisha, most Indian men thought of their wives as nothing more than glorified domestics. She made it very clear to Mohan that she did not fall into that category. Her attitude had amused him and he had reassured her that just as
she did not consider herself an “average” wife, he too was not an “average” husband. I want my women to be a companion, a mate not a maid”, (p.44) he had said. He stuck to it but Manisha was adamant. She did not want to go and her mother could not convince her about her decision. She refuses to lead a trapped existence like her mother who was forced to live with the destestable husband because she had been imprecated by this man. Since Manisha was the symbol of her bondage, she hated her, the younger daughter was her “revenge on that wretched drunk” (p.56) whom she adored. She asked her mother to say something about her decision. She turned to Manisha and said quietly “Divorce”. That is what it comes to. Further she spoke with steady eyes and a harsh voice. “When a wife decides not to go and live with her husband – for what reasons – she is breaking her marriage. Atleast that is what I believe in. You cannot have a marriage when two people are living separately leading their own lives. (p.52) Her mother asked her why she did not discourage him in the initial stage. Mohan fell into a light sleep. He was woken up by the bedside phone ringing. A dull voice at the other end repeated words. He was sure he had misheard. “I’m not coming, Mohan – can you hear me”? (p.57)

Mohan was certain he was hallucinating. He looked across at a small silver frame with his wife’s photograph in it. He was waiting for her voice to resume the heard conversation and tell him that she was just kidding. But all he got was a long engaged whine. Mohan replaced the receiver slowly and went to the bathroom. He needed to wake up and had a glass of water. Manisha looked around her bedroom for a few remaining traces of Mohan. There were still quite a number of them around. She began filling up carton
with the things he had left behind. It was going to be hours, may be days or even months. Before she got rid of them, she glanced at herself in the mirror and touched her stomach. Something told her there was life inside but Manisha was far too busy clearing up things. She’ wanted to pay attention to the new development tomorrow. And then make a decision just like her mother had so many years earlier.

Hence the open ended story leaves much space for the conjectures of the reader. The story handles complex psychological problems rooted in the fixed roles of women predetermined in the system. She declines to plant her frustration on her offspring as her mother had done. Her decision, independent and non-conformist in nature, establishes Manisha’s desire for self-determination. She creates Manisha through a negative dialectics and yet, the identity is positive. De opines that in a man’s world a women is little more than object that plays a marginalized role. Her existence as individual is of little significance. The situation of women had been pitiable since ages. Woman have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men. The real nature of woman remains dormant and they are reconciled to this kind of slavery because of her economic dependence on man. This shows control on woman through economic force, the close link between women’s oppression and the material conditions. There should be no gender discrimination in which man is ‘Absolute’ and woman is depicted as heroes rather than as victims or as the commodities to be sold or bought.

Shobha De’s another story “The Trip” emphasises the obscure, unpredictable and often inexplicable impulses of women which may create imbalance and prove responsible for the wreckage of marital life. Ritika was
a woman with wild and uncontrollable belongings. She looked different, acted different, behaved differently. This type of behavior got Ritika into a great deal of trouble as a school girl. As an adult Ritika was sick of the self-deception. She had started to feel more and more like an imposter. But she enjoyed offering advice on time management to harried careerists, giving tips on smart investments to housewives with small, private incomes, helping a mother understand a difficult child better, counselling a distraught wife on how best to cope with a neglectful husband without nagging. Hiten, her husband was a simple, self satisfied man whose idea of a marital crisis did not go beyond his wife’s refusal to attend a business dinner with him because she was just not “in the mood”. He saw in her only what he wanted to see – a loving wife, who behaved herself at parties. Sometimes Ritika wondered whether there was something seriously with her and she thought whether other woman also suffer from similar syndrome. Hiten had decided to take her along on a business trip abroad. They were to spend four days in Dubai. On their third day in Dubai, they were exhausted, dehydrated and desperately bored going from one glittering shopping mall to the other. Ritika wanted to have a glass of water. She sat on a small round table and looked blankly ahead of her while Hiten went off to get her tea. She saw a small, chic shoe shop adjoining the café. The shoes were different because they were beautifully crafted works of art in several tones – rich purples, deep pinks and greens. Ritika would not take her eyes off the footwear. She continued to stare, lingering over each hand crafted detail. Just when a man with a long easy stride walked out of the shop. Both noticed each other and he was one of the best looking men, she had ever seen. He walked a short distance to an
adjoining shop and came back briskly. His eyes caught hers again. In real life
Ritika rarely reacted to men – strange men but this was an extraordinary man.
She was reminded of some Hollywood movie star, an archetypal gigolo from a
European film or he resembled a Giorgio Armani advertisement – the one
that featured a mature man with a weathered face.

Hiten was off again. Ritika’s eyes went back again to the shop entrance.
He did not but walked back into the shoe store and Ritika felt bitterly let
down. She thought that he is the owner of the shop and wanted her to enter
his shop. In a dejected mood Ritika watched Hiten walking back with a
small plastic tray loaded with paper glasses of Pepsi and icecream. Her
impulse was to pick up her bag and tell that she is leaving him. As she
drank down her Pepsi thirstly, she imagined what he might be doing inside
the shop at that moment. She thought that he may be a salesman, he had a
fetish for women’s feet, maybe he worked in a shoe shop so that he could
cares hundreds of anonymous feet attached to strange woman. The stranger
came out again and this time he was accompanied by a woman. He looked in
her direction and smiled a small, ironic smile as he caught sight of Hiten. She
got the message and shrugged. He too shrugged and the women with him
took his arm possessively. Ritika guessed her to be his wife. The woman with
him looked brassy and hard and the way she clung to his arm revealed her
insecurity. She also looked ill-tempered and impatient. Before they crossed
the street and disappeared from view altogether, he turned around her one final
time and looked at Ritika with such intensity, it was as if they had made love.
Ritika’s hand which was holding the straw suddenly dropped to the table
with a loud thud and she felt exhausted.
Hiten stared at her and told her that she looks ill. She composed herself and turned towards Hiten. He was still looking at her, this time with genuine concern. May be we should try and see a doctor. You look “pale” (p.67) he said. Ritika straightened her narrow shoulder, pushed back the hair from her eyes, struck her chin out, inclined her head and smiled a slow, mysterious smile before. Saying “I’m fine Absolutely fine. Never felt better. Really.” She wasn’t exactly lying, either” (p.67).

Another story “The Fern Lady” exposes the pathetic cravings of Dheeraj, a successful, advertising executive, for a satisfying companionship betrayed by his ex-wife and present wife, searches in vain for friendship and rapport in the mysterious ‘Fern Lady’. When Dheeraj first saw her “she was half-hidden behind a bush fern.” (p.29). The next time when he looked, she was gone. Only the fern was still there. He went to the improvised bar in the corner of the large living room for a refilling. A voice interrupted his boozy reverie. It belonged to Shweta, the sultry wife of his wart faced colleague Dheeraj wandered into the tiny study and dropped heavily into a leather armchair. It was lousy party and he thought life itself was so lousy. He remembered the lost party at Wart Face’s house a few months ago. His ex-wife had been present with her new escort and even newer hair, short and bleached. She resembled an out-of-work hooker. The poor girl was really quite an innocent, though, his present wife was away in Delhi. Dheeraj was considered something of a minor genius, eccentric, impossible but talented. Without him, it was believed that his ad agency would suffer and even collapse. It was a life that suited Dheeraj just fine long, lonely hours spent in a semi deserted office, with the music of classic jaaz.
He spotted the ‘Fern Lady’ at the dining table. She was loading her already heaped plate with another helping of pillar. “Dheeraj drank noisily and she moved away lithely and gracefully. He exploited a deep, strange pain as he watched her blend into the crowd and became a golden blur. He wanted to work upon her, chase her, and hold her instead he asked for a fresh drink and went out into the terrace garden to clear his head. She was attractive. But there were atleast half a dozen attractive women, well dressed but most of them were in silk Salwar suits or trousers. She was in minority – clad in a saree. Dheeraj found himself wanting her with a desperation that was bordering on dementia. He rushed back into the room but she had gone. He thought of killing himself. Nothing interested him. He even disliked his newly done up home with an intensity that was manic. Every inch of it reflected ‘his current wife’s flamboyant taste. He wondered what the Fern Lady’ house was like. He told himself whether it reflected her personality or her husband’s. He could not bear to call him that the man was an absolutely jerk. He did not realise the treasure he had in his home. Dheeraj speculated that she may have. He was beginning to feel melancholy again. He thought if she did have a lover, there was no hope for him. A woman who took one lover could as easily take two or three. He thought like his wife or rather wives, the ‘Fern Lady’ was not like them. She looked wholesome and true. He did not want to think of her having children for some reason because children induced guilt. He again thought may be the ‘Fern Lady’ is barren or else her husband was impotent. But this woman aroused the latent father in him. He definitely wanted to have a child with her. But he was puzzled whether she already had a couple hanging on to
her saree pallav or would she leave them with the shole and agree to spend
the rest of her life with him. He did not call her but she called him and told
that she was worried about him since last night and whether he was alright.
He asked her to marry him. She laughed and told that she was already
married. She said that I’m across the road from you and if you risked your
neck by climbing out of the window and walking along the ledge, we would
see each other quite clearly. (p.106) He asked her name and told her that he
calls her the Fern Lady’. She replied whether there was a fern growing out
of her head. He told let us meet immediately and you take the elevator down.
The woman laughed and told him that it is not possible to drop everything
and walk out. Later he heard a noise in the room behind him. He waited
and his eyes were shut and his heart was pounding. He was beginning to feel
dizzy. His feet were numb and he was not able to hang on for much longer.
He screwed up his eyes tightly and began to see stars. He wanted to fly – he
was sure he could. Dheeraj opened his eyes and saw her. Then he saw the
lush green, fleshy new fern sitting smugly on his table. Dheeraj reached out
to grab the outstretched hand. Their fingers met briefly and then, Dheeraj
felt his own curling up stiffening – and pulling away (p.108) Hence in this
story De very adroitly demolishes the archetypal image of man as the
dominant gender and uncovers his Achilles hell – physical realities have deep
significance for De and she, by asserting woman’s sexual supremacy, again
alters the norm.

The story “Lines” concretise the meaning of “wholeness” in women.
Masculine culture translates the story of women into an ambiguous and
devaluated symbol. Women are to be used. They are the handmaids of man
and they search of identity is frustrated either by a harsh or a soft treatment. The most remarkable story of the collection narrates the tale of Simran’s unequal battle with the lines on her face that are out to destroy her beauty and youth. She is still beautiful with the aid of bottled lotions and “natural kitchen cosmetics”. People are shocked by her narcissistic tendency and the inevitable question is voiced by a spokesman of patriarchal society. Woman, a “possession” of man traditionally, is supposed to become indifferent to physical beauty if he is absent. A beauty conscious widow is considered to be evil Simran, through her conviction, challenges the stereotyped image of woman. To her beauty makes “the difference between being alive and dead” (p.112) She neither nurtures nor preserves her beautiful body for others, it is for her personal satisfaction. Simran’s detachment towards men in general is not disintegrating but revitalizing. She remains “mesmerised” by her body. The bed with its lacy fluffy pillows strewn over it, looked inviting – like an undemanding but perfectly attentive lover. Simran slid over its smoothness, reveling in the sensation. Her skin was glowing and her eyes shining. She thought, staring mesmerised at several softly lit images of herself reflected in the mirrors of her cool, perfumed room – Such beauty. Such perfection. Such bliss” (p.123) By underlining Simran’s personal absorption, De explodes the myth that woman’s identity exists largely being for others rather than being for herself. She challenges the dominant social constructions of identity and gender. Simran’s experience is equated with “bliss”. It cannot emerge from selfish glorification. She dislodges the males from her world and monitors personal freedom, power and all kinds of human relationships.
Her inner space remains unscathed. Despite being a woman, the impossible is made possible.

“Repeat Performance” is the story of an alienated couple. The day Ashish, the protagonist of the story, turned eight years old, he knew that he was made for the movies and the movies were made for him. Even at that young age, he hated the thought of selling automobile spare parts or setting in one of the three shops his father owned in the city. He did not want to spend his life dealing with corrupt mechanics and shifty-eyed garage owners looking for inflated bills or unrealistic discounts.

Ashish participated in his weekly dramatics classes where he truly flowered, opened up and came out of himself and became another person. His teacher recognised his talent, not his passion. But she encouraged him by including him in all the small productions which was enough for the time being. Ashish’s mother had laughed seeing her son with make-up on. He said to himself as he stared into the bathroom mirror. “I’m an actor. I’m an actor”. (p.127) Exactly twenty-two years later he was still saying the same thing. These days he said it out loud because he was an established successful actor. His first wife, Sunila, hated these words. His second wife was used to his morning monologue and had stopped reading to it.

Ashish was one of the busiest actors in the business. His wife Ambika had interior business and her own contracts kept her completely occupied. They both had their secrets and it was mutually understood that they would not pry into each other’s lives. They live together because it is bothersome to change the routine. Ambika would reveal in her interviews “We’re modern couple”, he has his priorities and I have mine. We share a certain
togetherness – but it’s not the oppressive sort. We believe in giving each other plenty of space” (p.129)  The space has become so wide that there is no attachment between the two. Both husband and wife led such depressingly insulated lives, filled with exaggerated civility and forced politeness Ambica missed the earlier passion of the relationship, the storms and rages. That there is just emptiness in her heart for him. She confessed to her only friend, Minal. Her friend advised her to break away from the meaningless marriage. Ambika’s eyes filled with tears and she whispered “Hope”. In her sterile life, she nurtures a hope of better communication and friendship with her licentious actor – husband. Repeated betrayal of trust fossilizes the distance. Ashish came back from the airport to find Ambika still awake. Ashish had a strange look in his eyes and his voice sounded high pitched. Ambika went back to writing her entries. He hovered around wordlessly. She looked up with an expression that conveyed her impatience. Ashish came and sat down on the bed close to her. He had broke out into a sweat and his forehead was covered with beads of perspiration. He stammered and wanted to tell her but she continued to write mechanically and Ashish remained silent.

Ashish reached out for her, his hands shaking and his fingers moving. She saw the despair in his eyes and felt the old stirrings of love-of affection and of caring – But almost as a reflex she pulled away and reminded herself that she should not get weak or allow herself to feel vulnerable. She thought he was manipulating her again and playing with her sentiments which he had done dozens of times in the past. Ashish was holding his head between his hands. She watched as tears poured out of his eyes. Ashish looked up at her and told that he was dying. Ashish looked at his wife’s exposed throat as she
continued to laugh. She pushed him away and stood up. He stood up unsteadily, his eyes were dry as he watched his wife dancing around the room chanting “Cancer, cancer, cancer.” (p.1356) Wordlessly, he walked out and went into his bedroom. He reached the phone but it was nearly 3 a.m. Ashish reached for something in the lower drawer of his bedside table. He groped around till his hand found what he was seeking. He checked and it was loaded. Ambika’s shrill laughter was echoing in his ears as he raised the gun to his mouth. He had done it in the movies dozens of times. It was really simple. Pull the trigger and bang and this time without a director. “Nobody to say “Cut”. No retakes. Bang! He’d get it right in the first to take itself. Bang! And he’d be dead. No applause. No “wah wahs”. No plastic blood. Bang! As easy as that as easy (p.136) Ambika could always pick up his award. Later he felt how effortlessly her wish had come true. Ashish commits suicide and repeats the performance often acted on the stage but this time, without any accolade. The interest of the story lies in the hollowness of marital life with the contradictory meanings of artificiality, deception, frustration, loneliness in the tinsel town, viewed from different points of view.

The story “Diwali” paints a picture of conjugal disharmony, the result of subversive elements in gender norms. The story is narrated backwards and begins with “It was going to be a bleak Diwali for Kalindi” (p.137). Slowly the story is unfolded before for reader. Kalindi’s husband Suresh, a top-ranking marketing man hopes to make his wife an “entrepreneur” and reach “the top”. The question of indulging in “conversation” did not arise with Suresh. He was the original monologist” given to sounding off on subjects dearest to his heart politics and marketing.
During the first five years, Kalindi had listened to him dutifully assuming her best, alert and involved expression. At that time, she was interested in her husband’s thoughts. He bored her so much that even her children’s comics seemed more interesting. But for the last couple of years, Kalindi had begun to switch off completely. She mastered the art of giving the appearance of listening while her mind was elsewhere – on a different plane and in a different land. The image of the “well adjusted happy couple” (p.140) important for both of them, is nurtured carefully. But her business success atrophies the marital bliss and becomes perennial cause of Suresh’s resentment. She considered where she has gone wrong in handling her husband Suresh was a pleasant enough chap, a mild mannered sort of fellow who avoided confrontations as far as he could help them. This was basically Kalindi’s view of marriage. She detested scenes and angry words. But this time their argument had reached a different plane altogether. It had turned ugly and vicious with Suresh raising his voice. “You are driving me to violence”. (p.141)

Kalindi walked out, her eyes stinging with tears but her head held high. She was not surprised by Suresh’s words because the accusation had become familiar to her over the past year – ever since she got further involved in her job and taken an extra commitments. Her income had doubled and she liked having her own money. She enjoyed the absolute control and unlike other wives there was no question of her asking Suresh for “pocket money”.

One day he snarled at her by saying that she stopped smiling and talking properly. Kalindi had remained mum on this issue. But the way he challenged her to dare speak her mind, that goaded Kalindi to burst out.
Provoked continuously by his ill temper one day she flings back: “Everything’s the problem. I’m sick of your bullying” (p.145) It is not a straight forward equating thwarted ambitions. For Kalindi, Suresh’s induction is a form of betrayal.

Five days have passed. In the past, scenes like these would have blown over fairly soon. Suresh had refused to look at her or even acknowledge her presence. She had gone about her routine like a robot. Kalindi had scribbled, “Marriage is the ugliest compromise in the world” (p.146) in her planner. Kalindi wrote long and loving letters to her children. She had made the usual pre-Diwali preparations – cleaned the house thoroughly, got rid of unwanted household articles, bought new clothes for the servants, ordered sweets from the lady who specialized in them. She bought an embroidered Kurta for Suresh, a saree for herself, and presents for the children. She was sure Suresh had noticed all because he will not miss the smallest detail. But the cold war was still on and he refrained from commenting. For the first time in their marriage it was Suresh who had switched off. There was a dead indifference in his eyes when he was at home. It effected Kalindi deeply more than she had thought. She felt exposed and weak. But far from denying it to herself, she started to wallow in these new feelings, believing that for the first time since her childhood, she was allowing herself the luxury of being true to the messages of her heart, not her mind was sending. Despite her husband’s “indifference” (p.146) Kalindi experiences the delight of “wholeness”. The dark mood prevailing on the Diwali day cannot crush Kalindi’s recently acquired self confidence. She
had unconsciously tuned into the emotional side of herself. A side that had been suppressed for such a long time.

Hence the image of the steady flame of light establishes beyond doubt Kalindi’s autonomous position. The battle between sexes for supremacy confirms her victory but the muted echoes are not congenial. De’s message is clear. Women of substance have to face irreconciliable alternatives for self definition. Matrimony is projected as a negative institution. A parallel to Kalidindi’s scarring and circumscribing, on archetypal pattern, is to be found in female Bildungsroman.

“Flowers” describes the emotional and stereotyped wait of an enamoured but off-betrayed wife for her callous and perfidious husband. A compelling question demands our attention. “Is the wife blissfully unaware or is it conscious awareness”? De has made the over-worked plot interestingly narrating it from the point of view of the mother, Mrs.Gokhale. She watches helplessly as life from her daughter’s body drains out. The materialistic attitude of the nurse and the apathetic disposition of the husband frames the tragedy of life. The psychic dwarfing takes place in the mother and the reader, the wife remains’ quite free from it.

The dying woman rasped from the hospital bed and requests her mother to bring Veni, diamond earrings, mangalsutra and bangles for the wedding anniversary. Her mother accepted because the precious daughter and favourite child was dying and nobody could help now. Her son-in-law Vasant’s name brought frown to Mrs. Gokhale broad, unlined brow. A two-timing blackguard whom hoped she would never have to see once Vandana has gone. It was her daughter’s twelfth wedding anniversary. It was a day
Vandana had always treated on par with a religious festival - A day when she would awake at dawn to offer prayers at the little shrine which she has installed in her room.

Fifteen years ago, Vandana had met a man in the corridors of her suburban college and fallen in love with him instantly. But unfortunately for Vandana, his love had vanished within the first year itself, while hers had only grown stronger. Mrs.Gokhale had often wondered about her daughter’s unshakeable faith in that faithless man – she shuddered at the memory of their elopement. It was not that Mrs.Gokhale disapproved of Vandana’s impulsive decision to run away, it was the man she had foolishly selected to spend the rest of her life. Vasant had betrayed his young, trusting wife over and over again during the fifteen years of their marriage. Vandana’s fragile marriage did suffer a serious shock just before her first bout of illness. It was the time Vasant disappeared for more than a week without a trace. Days together there was no news of his whereabouts and finally Mrs.Gokhale had then decided to take matters in her own hands. She had begun by making enquiries at the club her son-in-law frequented. She took her trusted accountant into confidence. She sent him to Ooty and briefed him thoroughly. According to Godbole’s version Vasant had received him cordially and without the slightest embarrassment, he read his mother-in-law’s letter and laughed. The woman sitting by his side read it thoroughly, crumpled it and thrown it into the waste paper basket. Vasant told him in a friendliest possible way to “buggar off”.

Mrs Gokhale half suspected that Vandana knew the truth about Vasant – and had always known it. She had only chosen to be blind to it. Marriage
was such a complicated business. Countless veils screened its ugly realities and protected the partners by making them accomplishes” (p.159)

Mrs. Gokhale wondered how women willing to throw their lives away for a rake ready to flatter their small egos with even smaller gestures that cost him nothing more than a tiny investment of time. Vandana’s eyes were unnaturally bright on the day of her wedding anniversary. Her excitement was apparent to Mrs. Gokhale the moment she entered the room. Vandana seemed far stronger and brighter than her mother had seen her in a long time. She never addressed her husband by name as a sign of respect for him. She was like a child of a party. She could not wait to get out of her hospital gown and into her freshly passed beautiful saree. Her mother climbed up to the next floor and rung up to Vasant. She heard a miffled conversation before Vasant finally came on the line. Mrs. Gokhale did not want to give him the option – not today of all days. She said to Vasant let her down now, it would kill Vandana almost immediately. She would not survive the night and it would not be cancer that would kill her, but a broken heart. When she noticed her closely, she had stopped breathing and the nurse declared “She’s dead” (p.166). Mrs. Gokhale shouted that her daughter needs a doctor immediately. Seeing his mother-in-law rushing, Vasant took two steps back and ducked out of her way. Vasant strode towards his wife’s room. He stared at Vandana’s face for a minute and looked quickly around the room. He saw the little shrine she had set up by her bedside which now had stale withered flowers adorning it. He noticed his framed photograph, taken in younger and happier days. He picked and turned it over. The inscription read “To my adorable Vandana. You are always in my heart, darling” (p.167) He threw
out his half finished cigarette and gazed at the nurse’s figure as she bent down to retrieve some unused tablets from the bottom drawer of the medicine cabinet. He glanced once more at Vandana

“Poor thing. Poor foolish thing. Sweet woman. But not his kind. Never had been. It was a mistake to have married to her. A big mistake. Marriage itself was a mistake. After a point every woman became a bore. A clinging, possessive, whining bore. He wasn’t going to make that mistake ever again. Definitely not. No second marriage. Of course. Florence would be furious. But he knew how to handle woman like her. It was Vandanas of the world who made him edgy, nervous and uncomfortable” (p.168)

He checked the time in his watch. He was running late as usual. He patted his jacket pocket and called out “Sister”. The nurse took the money from his hands and winked. She knew the old woman could pay her too. She also stuffed her pockets with the extra strips of tablets that could not be required now. She looked around for other things to pinch before the ward boys got their hands on them. She even took the extra veni. She had wear it later when she went out for a movie with her boy friend. The nurse walked out of the room leaving Vandana alone—the pale orange of the Aboli flowers creating a glowing halo around her small face.

Hence in this story De etches on archetyped condition of women that Margaret Atwood describes as “basic victim position” where one denies the fact that one is a victim. De has drawn a distinction between the conventions to which people are usually oriented and the real meaning of living. “Flowers” outline the disharmony in a conjugal life reflecting the conformity.

The story “Late Arrival” is the thrust on the plight of a girl child, a classic example of neglect. She is betrayed by her family and the middle aged professor who exploits her sexually. Amla’s mother was in her mid-forties when she was born. She was the eighth child and seventh daughter. Madhuri
moaned softly because a girl was born. She could have died that very night and it would have been better if she had. But Amla’s horoscope foreclosed such a possibility. Death would have been far too kind an option. Amla grew up a lonely, intense child in her large noisy family. It was only the time she spent with her father that brought big smiles to her solemn, small face. As Amla grew her looks improved, though she failed to grow normally in physical terms. She remained a sparrow like creature under five in height and frail of body. She could stare for hours at a pedestal fan and large tears would pour out of her eyes watching the unending rotation of its blades.

Her mother’s health had begun to deteriorate soon after the delivery. Her association with her mother remained distant and wary. Amla grew up feeling second hand and stale. Amla’s father died. She was studying in the college and it was crucial for Amla to do well. She was aiming for scholarship because it meant a lot to her. All she knew was that if she did, she could grab the opportunity and flee. As far away from the hell that was her home as was possible. Besides, Amla had also met someone who had promised to help her. He was her sociology professor – a scholarly, serious, married man.

Amla’s crush on Srinivasan was as intense as everything else in her life. She was the brightest student in his class and he had decided to appoint himself her mentor. College had become her haven and refuge. Srinivasan’s class would bring a spring to her step and a song to her lips. Amla sat on small stool in the passage trying to concentrate on her studies. She needed a few things from her trunk but did not dare to intrude. Amla rushed down the wooden stair case and into the street to the professor’s house. She found his home after searching wildly in dark, narrow lane. She rang the bell and
the door was opened by a woman his wife. When Amla asked for help to stay for one night to study, the women laughed and said my husband thought he will win a scholarship and go abroad but he is stuck in the lousy college with paltry salary. I was also his student once just like you. I also believed he could solve all my problems but in vain. She asked her not to waste her time and Amla turned to leave. She started running and went straight into Srinivasan. He held her closed to him and led her away gently into an even darker corner of the narrow deserted street. Amla wondered which one to blame for her own rotten destiny” p.185).

Hence the story reveals that her precarious existence presents the archetypical narrative pattern of the hunter and the hunted, pursuit and forced submission, accompanied by images of suffocation, dwarfing and degradation. The predicable castrophe, the perennial dilemma of woman” the rape trauma archetype” (Annis Pratt, 1981, p.5) impoverishes the excellence of the story. Amla’s world remains unexciting because of her creator’s imaginative perception. Even in her inferiority, she fails to exercise autonomy.

The last story of the collection “Bindi” has juxtaposed the plight of a young couple – Sushma and Asif, entrapped in a politically volatile atmosphere in Bombay. After the riots, the mutual suspicious fanned by parents, friends, colleagues, servants and neighbours interferes with the normal conjugal life. The seed of distrust planted by the obscurantists, ultimately fractures marital relationships.

When Sushma married Asif, the Bombay bomb blasts had yet to take place. When information of the blasts first reached Sushma, she was busy teaching her regular class of restless eight year old students. Sushma and
Asif’s marriage was a registered one performed at a mutual friends small flat and attended by the two families. It had been decided that Sushma would not convert to Islam or change her name. Asif’s parents announced to the small congregation present that they wished to respect their daughter-in-law’s religious sentiments, adding that they were confident that religion would not become an issue in this marriage. After the signing ceremony a small dinner party was also arranged. Sushma was a quiet, withdrawn girl and people left her alone including her parents. Most of her friends and relatives criticised her in one way or the other. Asif held her by the shoulders and consoled her.

Sushma’s mother once said before her marriage if you are serious about this relationship, there are going to be problems. When Sushma reached her home, located in a leafy shaded by lane off Carmichael Road in the early afternoon by March 6th she found her father-in-law waiting for her in the small foyer of their building. Afzal bhai, her father-in-law shook his head and waved his hands to indicate all was well with her husband. The house was still and quiet as the two of them went inside. Local TV reports about the bomb blasts had just started to trickle in. Sushma heard her husband talking to his parents. She had seen her distance call to a cousin in Florida. Asif was thinking about emigrating. And he did not think of consulting his wife. This attitude began to haunt Sushma – “Were they were suspicious”? (p.212) Sushma saw the despair in Asif’s eyes and she felt her own welling up. She began to feel alienated from her own parents. Every topic led to just one subject. The atmosphere bristled each time she visited. At work too, she found it hard to answer questions posed by children in her
class. That afternoon Sushma resigned her job. She felt Asif never used such language at all. But he started cursing a great deal especially at her. Even as they lay together in the stillness of the night, he abruptly threw the covers off and stalk out of the room, cursing under his breath.

Later Sushma started changing herself. An edge of defiance had crept into small everyday acts that had once been so unimportant to her. She had started wearing large, elaborate bindis - especially when the family was going out together. She had taken to displaying her mangalsutra prominently and stopped of wearing salwar – kameezes in favour of traditional sarees. But Sushma broke down on hearing the anguish in his voice. She started to gulp in an attempt to hold back her sobs “let the tears flow”, he said, his voice barely a whisper. “If I could cry, I would too” (p.214)

There was a flame coloured sky outside their window and Sushma could hear the birds chirping as they returned to their nests before dusk darkened the horizon. It was that suspended time of day full of uncertainty and dread that had always scared her when she had been a child. She clung on to Asif, her slim body shaking with sorrow. “I’ve tried”, she kept repeating, “but it isn’t working. And I’m so tired” (p.214) He stroked her hair and held her close. It was a familiar embrace. The birds had stopped chirping. When Sushma turned to Asif and said “I want to go to bed. Let’s just sleep now – before the birds wake us up again.” (p.214)

Hence the story emphasises that “Bindi” becomes the symbol of revolt and assertion. Sushma and Asif betray each other’s trust. Here, neither the wife nor the husband is either the victim or the vanquisher, both are
scapegoats of different but rigid religious faiths. De’s magnifying glass focuses on the betrayed human race. The desire for responsible selfhood for the achievement of authenticity is thwarted by religious dogmatism. Interestingly, the story obliterates the role of Eros. The absence of national humanism is the cause of conflict.

In this collection of short stories Shobha De’s eye for detail, her piercingly accurate characterization, her perceptive probing of the secret depths of the human psyche are all evident in this volume. Godbole with his fantasies about his neighbour. The pathetic cravings of Dheeraj, the highly successful advertising executive. Ageing Simran’s obsession with beauty. Kalindi’s discovery of herself. Ritika’s wild and uncontrollable longings, Amla, the recluse born of a desolate, despair, filled childhood. Sushma and Asif – the newly married couple trying desperately to prevent the strained threads of their inter-caste marriage from snapping. Easily recognizable everyday people, their lives and souls laid bare, the subtle nuisances in their characters brought out in stunning detail. Each story encompasses its own exquisite world of passion, romance, fantasy and inevitably, hard reality. The author’s saucy, racy and captivating style invokes vivid images, which compel the one to identify himself or herself with the characters and situations of each story. The sensitive, introspective stories in this volume will linger to haunt. (Shobha De, 1995, p.1)

De has also concretised varied dimensions of male female relationships, often tortured and tormented. Jaundiced gender perceptions have not blurred her vision. Demanding questions have been raised and answered; primitive instinctive conflicts pushed to the periphery have given
way to the eroding and fragmenting frictions of human life. The institution of marriage has been viewed from the male and female angle. De has established that the realisation of selfhood is a problematic experience for man as well as woman. She points at strategic moments of betrayals when self knowledge vanishes into ignorance. Her sensitive portrayal of life neutralizes the effect of derogatory criticism.

Shobha De’s short stories stress the value of equivalence of power. Whenever this balance collapses there is tension and hypocrisy in society. She introduces economic aspects of power struggle. “Eventually” she says “everything boils down to money – that great leveller” (p.110: 1994) There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self sufficiency. She projects men’s pride, incompatible marriages, traditional norms of behavior and patriarchal social system as the real forces of the oppression of women. De emphasises the quest for meaning of life, identity and unfulfilled emotional behavior of man and woman. The relationship between man and woman is presented as almost hollow, ineffectual and compromising, resulting into the shattered man-woman image. Shobha De is an advocate of justice, liberty and equality of women. (p.81) De herself would consider the treatment of the Woman Question as the most significant contribution made by her work. She once said: “I did write with a great deal of empathy toward women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman’s situation” (February 12, 1995, 3)

All the stories narrated in the third person, introduce rapid remodulation of circumstances to explore illusions and establish reality. “In The Motorcycle”, “The Fair One” “The Bar Man” and “The Fern Lady” De is
more interested in exploring the consciousness of the male protagonist than in narrating his deeds. The complex personalities, the emotions of the character demand patient, minute and sentimental power of analyst that De possess abundantly as an observer. “The Decision”, “Voices” “The Trip” “Lines” “Dewali” “Flowers”, “Late Arrival” emphasize upon obscure, unpredictable and often inexplicable impulses of women. “Repeat Performance” and “Bindi” dissimilar to other stories, apprehend reality through the disintegrating social forces that often give birth to maladjustments, distress and complexes in mortals.

Shobha De’s stories are primarily concerned with the plight of the modern Indian Woman. She may have escaped from the constraints of the traditional family, but the roles into which she tries to fit are stereotypical. Her themes are universally applicable. Her characters attempt to make sense of their lives, to find a pattern in the past and a diversion for the future. Despite of a lot of progress in the field of science and technology, and the apparent freedom granted to the new woman, the society still marginalises woman on the basis of gender distinction.

Reviewer’s comments on Shooting From The Hip: “On her observations on travel, food and films” says the critic K.V. Sarendran, “She is straight forward and original”.

A mélange of themes, personalities, random thoughts, all forcefully, even colourfully expressed – there is much that is amusing outrageous, thought provoking, even shocking. But above all, it is the transparent honesty and the facile prose that impresses. De is immensely readable. And whether it inspires decision or admiration, Shooting from the Hip is impossible to ignore.

The Hindustan Times.
Staggeringly beautiful, she’s also touchingly humble about her work. Looking into her eyes, I saw loneliness, passion, fear, humour, uncertainty, anger, sorrow and enormous strength. Not at once, but in succession, a reaction to circumstance - like a Chameleon. Rare have I encountered such windows into a soul opened so freely. What emerges is what one reads in her work: enigmatic, straight forward, crude, eludite, girlish, wise, and, ultimately, uncontrived truth, she doesn’t know how good a writer she is – which is why she is so good a writer.

Paul W. Roberts  
- The Toronto Review

She slaughters macho males with vengeance, and rattle poisons her gender with disdain and disregard. She is Shobha De and she is scintillating and straight. She is a ruthless writer with a ramrod of a pen, and raging urge to kill somebody. She demolishes reputations and civilizations with effortless grace, and one thing she does not stomach is hypocrisy of any kind. She wields a powerful camera, and she needs to keep shooting that way, whether anyone likes to photoframe or not.

The Tribune

De is of the opinion that institutions of marriage and family have come under tremendous strain in the modern times, primarily in the western culture and in the rich strata of the Indian society. Her one of the novels “Socialite Evenings” presents the crumbling families and marriages of the different women character. The definition of the institution of marriage gets new interpretation in the context of De’s discussion. It grants complete sexual freedom to women with no bondage of marital relationship. In this novel Karuna, the protagonist represents a modern urban woman for whom her own career is prior to everything. She distinguishes herself by her own idea of emancipation and uncompromising attitude towards the legacy of orthodoxy and conservation. But to adjust herself to the changing scenario and modes of thought and way of living, she later gets married to a young rich man. Soon, she realises failure of her marriage. She thinks that she has
married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. She feels that she has been locked up in the meaningless marriage. The relationship between Karuna and her husband is devoid of affection. It is strange and mechanical. The absence of feeling and concern for each other is revealed in her words:

I would lie there staring at the ceiling as he pounded away. Or sometimes I would mentally review the day accounts. I can never remember my thoughts being anything other than unedifying (SE.59)

Lack of communication and emotional attachment between them made her life boring. She starts feeling as a well trained Indian wife. Besides this her humiliation by her husband brings out the sad plight of women. He says:

You don’t deserve me and my family. My mother had told me at the very beginning – find out more about this girl and her family. Are they like us? Will they fit in? will she? And I had given her a guarantee that you would be O.K. How wrong I was and how right she had been! (SE p.178)

Thus as a wife Karuna serves the perfect example of miserable Indian woman. She is frustrated due to her sterile marital life. Referring to the non-responsive attitude of her husband and the unbearable condition. She says:

“It was taken for granted that our needs were. Secondary to theirs. And that in some way we ought be grateful for having a roof over our heads and four square meals a day (SEP 61)

In this patriarchal social set up woman is reduced to a mere object. Karuna’s husband treats her as an object subjected to his own will. As a result there is a complete loss of her identity. In an attempt and a quest to fulfill her emotional and psychological needs, she develops an extramarital relationship with Krish, an old friend of her husband. Karuna’s husband
doubts this relationship which finally result in a divorce. But just before their separation, through the pretensive act of forgiveness, her so-called husband tries to assert his male superiority. Hence karuna illustrates that marriage subjugates and enslaves women. They fall victim to men because of their financial dependence. De does not attack individuals, but the system that favours woman and causes women’s subjugation and marginalization. De also goes further and says that marriage for women is considered as the most important event. It is a solution to their problems. It is considered as the ultimate goal in life. Traditionally, marriage is everything for the young women in India. In life there is nothing to look forward and nothing to achieve other than marriage.

Similarly in the novel “Starry Nights” the character of Malini reflects the story of hundreds of such women who lead the life of slavery, misery and suffering the day they give up their career in preference to marriage. In another novel “Sisters”, De deals with the themes of family, career and marriage. It is the prime fact that the author gives the top most priority to family and this is crystal clear when she evinces her ideas about marriage which match to Robert Burns (1963: p.34) who says:

Marriage is a social institution wherein two individuals have to live together. There can’t be any inequality in this area. The partners depend upon each other. In the same manner as the ‘bow’ and arrow. If any one of the partners dominate the other, it will not serve any purpose. If two persons with their distinct personalities wish to live a united life based on love, each of them must understand the other. Each individual must have the necessary knowledge, courage and determination to face the turbulent waves of the sea of marriage.
Shobha De highlights the difference between old and young women’s attitude towards marriage, love and life by contrasting the views of Aparna and her mother in the novel “Snapshots”. If husband is an awful word for Aparna, for her mother, a woman is incomplete without a husband. The traditional mother of Aparna says:

Remember, a woman in our society is nothing without a job. But don’t let all these things effect you, give you a big head. You may be the prime minister of India tomorrow, but when you come home, you automatically become your husband’s wife. If you forget that you are finished. Your marriage is finished (Snapshots 24-25)

The approach of Aparna’s mother is traditional like that of Shashi Deshpande’s female characters. For her, marriage is reality. On the other hand, Aparna like the ultra modern woman rejects the institution of marriage though, marriage is a sacrament in India, in the fictional world of De, it is not regarded as essential. Infact the women of the modern society are trapped due to their power madness. Each one of them is trapped by a patriarchal society.

In the words of Anita Desai:

“In reality woman is nothing but a common drudge; first in her father’s house then her husband’s a beast of burden bearing an endless string of children, accepting the brutality of husband, she has no alternative. But Shobha De’s women are different, quite the opposite of Anita Desai’s. They have the courage to think of the alternatives. (1990: 972)

As a writer, De has focused on the marginalisation of women, Indian society. She has great understanding of the depth of the psyche of woman and her problems. She explores the world of urban woman and emphatically says that even in the modern times with all socio-political as well as economic achievements, the graph of woman exploitation is shockingly rising.
Sometimes due to the unavoidable circumstances in their lives, women are pushed into the net by their protectors while at other times their high ambition and will to assert their freedom endanger them. De’s women do not believe in suffering submissively. They struggle with all their strength to reach the peak of joy and success in male-dominated society. They revolt and shape their destiny by living for themselves and earnestly protest against subordination. (Jaydipsinh Dodiya, 2000, p.15.)

Until the sixties and seventies man alone was looked upon as bread winner and woman was confined only to household work. Since time immemorial the Indian woman has lived under the protection either of parents or husband or her own children. This pattern outwardly has made her life safe and smooth, but actually slavish and dependent. In the modern era, a woman to has become a direct money earner, shouldering her household duties. The new education has awaken her real self. As a result, she has started thinking of independent and reliant life. And in order to translate this thinking into reality now she has started fighting against her own timid self as well as man’s protectoral shell. The fight is tough but it has set in. Perhaps, her writings will encourage majority of women to shoulder confidently their changed new roles but without breaking social equilibrium. Certainly, they will take precaution to maintain harmony in man-woman relationship catering for values and ethics of Indian cultural heritage.

The neo-rich Indians particularly the educated, beautiful, attractive and competent, confident and assertive socialite women, seem to define marriage like mutual fidelity till death (Natricarami) the highest, ideal for both the husband and wife, has no sense for them Marriage to them is hardly
more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be put to an end dependency upon the whims of the partners. The modern Indian woman is no longer a model of vedic, or pre-vedic dignified women, nor is the modeled on the post Aryan woman who is passive in nature and accepts the dominance of man in society. The woman born in post war generation in an atmosphere of bewilderment and confusion has become bold and capable of surviving in degrading the moral values of life. These characters suffer a humiliation as far as sheet social, economic and cultural life is concerned but they also find themselves capable of struggling, compromising and realizing their existence in the end. The long silence is broken and the anguish of woman is expressed. But no matter how loudly or strongly the issue on women is raised, the picture is still gum. Although the women wishes to take a bold step, but because of certain values instilled right from where she feels a peculiar sense of guilt, if she breaks the present norms one has to learn to live with the stark realities of life. For those who have been taught to conform to the traditions, it is difficult to snap the pious cord, that lends them in matrimony.

Marriage is considered a game for security and convenience. If the wife is not happy with her husband, she can pack up and go away any moment. The educated women is beset with the problem of striking an acceptable compromise between modern thinking and aesthetic perceptions and the traditional morality which logs her at every step. What the new woman’s aspirations hint at is that tender approaches an important thing in man-woman relationship and particularly in man’s behavior toward woman. The woman belonging to this class demand equal rights with men. They are
hell bent to demolish every existing role and question any norm which subordinates women to men or accords them a place subservient to men.

As far as the man-woman relationship is concerned in the stories of Shobha De, her protagonist points out the ‘mad clarity’ of all family relationships, the farcical nature of all marriages, the illusory quality of all human relationships, male and female. There is not only a rejection of the unquestioning acceptance of the traditional female role – what she portrays is the deeply felt and suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. There is a question towards the concept of ‘real love’ the quest is by no means successful.

Shobha De illustrates, a spacious panoply of themes in her stories, ranging from left using politics, feminism, sexual licence, generation gaps, the persistent rivalry between marriage, career and self-fulfillment the polemics of tradition, change, religion, the ambiguities of personal and cultural liberation the pulling tensions in familial relationships, lust, guilt, incest female narcissism; the restlessness of intellectual women leading to self delusion, fragmentation, and all the bedrock hurt connections between men and women.

What is stressed now is the shared humanity of man. The tenderness of conjugal love and the family life, man’s love for children and grandchildren tell us about the resemblances between people, pink, brown or black. This harmonious concord between human suffering and man-woman relationships, herself having been a witness to it all.

Autonomy for the self and nurturance of the family should lead to imaginative sympathy for the human race. Bikering between the sexes is futile as humanity is more than just mere species. The starting point for
cultivating warm human relationships is conjugal love. Family life is very important for deepening the woman’s awareness of her responsibility towards mankind. While it is true that a woman is not an appurtenance and marriage is not a career, that motherhood is not a great marvel it was deemed to be, it is now seen that conjugal oneness and enduring family life are the necessary first steps in preserving a woman’s needs of nurturing of warm familial relationships.

Thus the vision is one of togetherness of people working and living closely together, of people not being segmented internally. This would enable the woman to meet the challenges of life in tune with her own potential and in solidarity with others.

Shobha De is aware of the fact that the most remarkable difference between man and women lies in woman’s sexuality. The economic, socio-political and cultural barriers are imposed upon her by various forces since time immemorable. In this male-dominated society, woman from their childhood are made to learn how to compromise and adjust with secondary status. Adolescent stage makes them think that their desires will be fulfilled in their marriages for they look at marriage as a solution to their problems. But in reality, marriage shatters all their dreams and they suffer miserably in their marital lives. And this confusing situation compels them sometimes to take such step, which is a major deviation from the established traditional norms. Being a women, Shobha De, through some of her women characters present a vivid picture of the inequality between man and woman prevalent in the society even today. She draws our attention to woman’s exploitation,
discrimination and commodification. It is very apparent that women in this male dominated society are treated with double standards.

In Indian tradition, marriage is the turning point and the beginning of a new way of life. It is glorified as a holy union of man and woman. It is a ritual that involves the sanctity of Agni or holy fire, the ‘Sapthapadi’ the mantras like Dharmecha’, ‘Kaamecha’; and fidelity till death. However in De’s opinion all these ideas regarding marriage are shattered by her modern liberated women. As the women do not find happiness in marriage, they go out in search of more fulfilling experiences without any hesitation. De depicts the breaking up of the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In this context Shobha De’s confident, attractive and assertive woman redefine the concept of marriage. Accordingly, man and women do not become one in marriage, instead they merely become partners in conjugal bliss. With marriage the other important issue that De deals is with sex. Sex to her women is no longer dreaded and despised thing. Her women enjoy a great deal of sexual freedom. Even marriage cannot prevent them from enjoying sexual freedom. The movement their marriages fail, they establish extra-marital relationship.

The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient women with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense, but because she is looking for a life long meal ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is not compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage because she has nowhere else to go.
In her writings, De shows that the world is out of order. She has tried to highlight the discord in marital relationships. It is usually painful and destructive for them to be together. Her writings reveal the institution of marriage is a failure since it is “liveless, joyless and bridges” (p.65). The average Indian woman’s marital life is “an exhausted generation of universal with no dreams left” and marriage to whom is “like a skin allergy, an irritant all right” (p.65) De says marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. But despite these laxities, a husband was above all, “A sheltering tree, a rock to the wife” (p.68) they were not wholly bad or evil and a wife as a woman was only a peripheral being. Among men, even the savage races of the world are known to “live under a well regulated marriage system” (Ibid, p.3). The family, the smallest sociological unit, implies marriage, implicit or explicit, which in turn lent this unit stability, togetherness and mutual care. Havelock Ellis says “Marriage in the biological sense is a sexual relationship entered into with the intention of making it permanent, even apart from whether or not it has received sanction of law or Church (Ibid, p.4).

The role of woman is changing with each decade of a century, always with a good deal of social conflicts and ideological struggle. These have left, a great influence on sexual more and social codes of the prevalent society which in turn is well embodies by Shobha De in her characters. She voice against the malist culture and strongly detests the marginalization. Her female characters especially only after they have gone through their own experiences, come to their real self. The sexless existence of unfulfilling relationship is bound to leave a scar on the psyche of a sensitive woman – one of the results is a underspread “restless feeling, a deep rooted frustration and
disenchantment which culminates in identity crisis – The crisis of growing up” and deciding as to what one, and is going to be”. De herself would consider the treatment of the women as the most significant contribution made by her works. She sensationally underlies the modern woman’s insistence to obtain social acceptance for a free expressions of her libido.

De’s insightfulness, alertness and ambivalence have reached new heights in her writings which we see particularly with regard to project the psyche of an Indian married woman who is caught and crushed between the nature – culture wheels on the one hand and pulled a post by the antrifugal and antripetal acts of man. Her writings expose the woman’s world and the graphic depiction of their pursuits and experiences. There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self sufficiency. The new Indian women who have attached economic independence are “a bereaved apart” from others. They enjoy economic independence and this attitude is characterized by a rare seriousness.

Alexander Walker observes

“The advantages resulting from the states of marriage are that the sexes may reciprocal, satisfy the natural desire which are felt equally by each one that they equally submit the exercise of the reproductive organs to a healthful regularity, that they may equally perpetuate their common speaks; that they may equally by respective duties, provide for the children providing from their mutual union, that they may equally assist each other throughout life by reciprocal affectioned cares, that they may in old age receive the cares of their common progeny and that they may in death and well being, reach that age which all these circumstances generally enable married pains to attain. (p.5) Walker goes on the assert “History proves that marriage is essential to the well being of human society and that celibacy brings ruin upon states.” (Alexander Walker, 1987, p.75)

Hence there emerged the New Woman, who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. This New Woman is conscious, confident
and sometimes even aggressive. To acquire a new identity, she is seen dealing with the world around on her own terms. She occupies the centre and has got aid of her position of the “Other”. She has become aware of her destination, that is to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs imposed on her by the male dominated society. Becoming conscious of her own rights, she has started to fight against the human elements like ego, greed, ambition and selfishness. De shows on the important shift in the position of her women who are autonomous. They do not depend for their survival on their fathers, husbands or sons. On the other hand they have required strength to face life with all its ups and downs. They fall into the category of the New Woman who solves her problems herself. It is on this basis, De is slowly acknowledged as one of the pioneers in the portrayal of the New Indian Woman in her stories. According to K.K.Sinha Shobha De “presents the confident, enterprising ambitious, and individualistic new woman who demands attention, equality and peace; not on compromising terms but on terms at par with man.” (The Commonwealth Review, IX.2 1997-1998)

Shobha De’s another book “Spouse” The Truth About Marriage is written based on the author’s personal experience, observation and life examples from consulted couples. The author believes equal space, freedom and respect for both partners and values the so called ‘marriage’. The author feel that Time, Tolerance and Tenderness (TTT) essential for relation, imagination, understanding and dignified compromises – the author is practical in views. De says that she believes the institution of marriage is underthreat. Not, just in India, but all over the world. Marriage is for those who believe in it, who actively want it, who enjoy it. If there is too much
‘self’ in marriage, it does not work. If there is too little, well that does not work either. If one begins to think of marriage as a basic human ‘need’, one then starts examining its downside a little more sympathetically.

Marry because you want to marry
Because you believe in it. Because you wish to share your life with someone.
You care about. Only then will what marriage survive and thrive (p-XV)

In most of her writings De has been preoccupied with creating a new image of the woman who has been traditionally taken for granted as a weak, docile and submissive individual and for that reason suppressed and exploited by the male dominated society. De endeavours to present the new woman as one who is daring, ambitious and aspiring, and is possessed of a great potential to realize her dreams and force upon the male dominated world, a due recognition of her identity. To achieve her goal, the new woman goes all out to exploit her potential both physical and intellectual.

De’s artistic maturity and purpose are evident in her writings. She dazzles the readers with her frank and candid tales of human relationships, particularly man woman relationship, old and new value patterns. The changing moral values of people reaching new heights in riches and civilisation is given an unrestrained depiction in her stories. Unlike other women writers who have always shown a conscious restraint in writing about the physical side of man-woman relationship and also about the dark sides of loose morals in marital relationships, De evinces a dare devil courage in writing freely about sex, the new woman and society. The images of both man and woman lays bare as a large chunk of the social reality which remained unexplored for a long time.
Indian woman over the ages has been an image of tolerance, sacrifice and purity. She has always occupied a place secondary to man who lords over her as her master. Men rule over women despite the fact that there have been so many reforms and changes in the modern world through education and learning. Her identity for rights and equality has gained acceptance in western countries to a very large extent. Women in these places are much more emancipated than their counterparts in Asia. In India too the female voice for power and equality is gradually rising higher. The importance of participation of women in the growth and development of the human society is shown by Sarojini Naidu. As Naidu observed:

“Other national questions come and to go; they are the result of the time changing spirit; but one question that never changed since the beginning of time itself, and life itself, is the duty of womanhood, the influence of womanhood, the sanctity of womanhood, the simple womanhood as the divinity of God upon earth, the responsibility of womanhood in shaping the divinity into daily life’ (p.9) The importance of giving woman a dignified place in society has also been voiced by great men of India like Gandhiji, Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. Tagore had said “women should acquire pure knowledge for becoming a more mature human being and utilization knowledge for becoming a true woman” (p.10)

Indian women over the centuries have been portrayed as pictures of pain, hardship and struggle. They have always been shown as dependents who live at the mercy of the men in their lives. They have no identity, dignity or individuality, if they are made to stand a little farther from their men. Their life begins and ends in and around the house which is their permanent home from the very time they are married off by this parents. Liberty and individuality are unknown to them. With the advent of education from the West, the Indian society got a chance to see the advancement reached by the
western world and its liberal views towards women. It was not an easy task to make. Indian men accept the fact that women were equally human like them. But education opened the eyes of the simple urban and rustic Indian women. They started coming out of their homes to experience and explore the outside world. They had to face lot of hurdles and hardships to create some space for themselves in the fiercely hostile male-dominated Indian society.

Nayantara Sahgal comes close to Shobha De in strongly protesting the denial of freedom to Indian Women. She believes in “New Humanism” and “New Morality” according to which the Woman is not to be taken as a “Sex” object and a glamour doll, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, bullied into a passive role that requires no individual identity. She pleads in her writings for new marital morality based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity and absence of pretence, selfishness and self centeredness. The new morality based on freedom from fear, frank communication and mutual love can according to Sahgal create the “Oxygen of understanding” which can save the present generation from the explosive psychic trauma of marital conflict” (p.9)

The advocacy of man and woman problems is clearly seen in the works of Indian women writers. What was just a beginning with Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, it gets a more strident treatment in Shobha De. Her writings constitute a strong literary bashing of the Indian male. Through her novels and short stories, she tries to shatter the unsympathetic and uncivilized attitude of callousness and indifference of men towards women. Marriage is no longer regarded as an essential element for the well being of
the family and society. Marriages are no longer considered to be made in heaven. Due to the husband’s betrayal the woman claims her right to enjoy unlimited sexual freedom. Constancy and faithfulness in their married lives seem to be bygone values and no longer relevant. De has given a full throated message in her writings that no man should underestimate women and that the new women is here to stay and men be aware of the new reality. The New Woman of De is a being in her own right who is in the process of becoming - she seeks self fulfillment through self expression in a milieu where there is mutuality of understanding and tenderness.

De is of the opinion that woman serves the family and takes care of their physical as well as emotional needs. But their own expectations are ignored and she is taken for granted. No choices are allowed to women in their lives. There is the shadow of male dominance over every aspect and facet of their lives which thwarts their progress. They experience claustrophobia and their wishes are buried in the depths of their hearts and are never allowed to come out or be fulfilled. The authoritative and dominating male has not only suppressed the female voice but also brought silence, dullness and repulsion to the houses women live in. They can neither hate nor love but be content with ‘the gift of silence’.

According to De every individual male or female has opportunities for developing him or herself and attaining an identity of one’s own she believes in authenticity of the experiences of her characters as they grow out of her own assessment of their situation. Her protagonists try to break away from the shackles of the society for it enables them to throw away the rotten customs and rituals and instill a sense of dignity and self respect in their
lives. They are sensitive, self conscious, brilliant and creative. She attempts to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Her protagonists pass through the various stages in their lives through memorial and they realize and understand the limitations of the male-dominated society and also protects against the ‘moth-eaten morality’. She portrays in depth, the meaning of being woman in Modern India.

In this sense the new woman whose prime concerns are dominance and self assertion, the study treats such woman as “aberrations” - But De cares rotten figure for such appellations enter for her or for her bold, brash and beautiful women! It may not therefore be wrong to say that De will long remain a celebrated name among the women writers of India. She is nodoubt blunt and candid in her writing. Yet she is widely accepted. She has long way to go and we look forward for having more works from her pen.