

SHOBHA DÉ IS A DIDACTIC WRITER

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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes how ShobhaDé is a didactic writer in the field of popular fiction and hailed as the queen among story-tellers. Further it stresses how her novels are typical period novels and how they recreate the contemporary scenario, using stereotypes of contemporary society. Finally, how the novels turn out to be excellent social histories, telling the story of their era with a great deal of verisimilitude.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Popular Fiction, Serious Artist And A Didactic Writer.

Indian English novelist who has carved a niche for herself in Indian English fiction is Shobha Dé, who specializes in novels of higher middle class Indian society, with a special preference for the glitterati, mostly in and around Bombay. Her novels are part of the body of contemporary popular fiction, as distinguished from literary, mainstream or canonical literature. Shobha Dé is credited with being a pioneer in the field of popular fiction and hailed as the queen among story-tellers. However, she has also been denounced as the princess of pornography.

Shobha Dé is one of the India's best-selling novelists. Dé started her career in journalism in 1970 and in due course earned a great deal of popularity. Dé's career as a novelist started with the publication of her first and best-selling novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989). Dé has to her credit eight novels and eight non-fictional prose works. Her *Small Betrayals* (1995) is a collection of short stories. Dé, in collaboration with Khushwant Singh, has edited a collection of

articles titled *Uncertain Liaisons: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India* (1993).

It is high time that the myth that great literature is always No living author was acknowledged. In course of time, however, this trend changed. It is fitting and proper that people should live with living literature. A thinking mind should respond to popular literature that has persisted in spite of critical disapproval. Leslie Fiedler, in *What Was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society*, asserts that literature cannot be kept alive and growing if popular literature is despised (109-14). Lowell, in "Popular Fiction: Why We Read It, Why We Write It," says that most publishers talk highly of literary fiction but make money on popular fiction. Literary fiction cannot be popular, because it is difficult and inaccessible and because it needs to be endorsed by critics, who are usually difficult to please. In popular fiction, the only critics who really matter are the readers, who judge an author by his or her ability to make an often told tale freshly exciting.

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Popular fiction entertains readers rather than exercise them. In modern society, popular fiction is story after story pointing out that life is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing, not just a chain of defeat and despair, but full of possibilities, victory being one of them and joy being another and that life is worth the pain (elizabethlowell.com. n.d .Web. 2 May 2012). Popular fiction facilitates the production of period novels, wherein according to Royal A. Gettmann, the characters are "expository illustrations of the period rather than living people" (218).

Dé's novels are typical period novels. They recreate the contemporary scenario, using stereotypes of contemporary society. As such they turn out to be excellent social histories, telling the story of their era with a great deal of verisimilitude. They are not to be mistaken for historical novels proper, but their recreation of the society of the time is unerring. As such, they are valuable social documents, which offer the reader a glimpse of the social forces at work at that time. Dé's novels capture the life style of upper middle-class metropolitan society, with all its social glamour, moral degeneration and sordid complexities. That is why her novels have been condemned as pornographic by devotees of canonical literature.

However, there is another side to Dé's fiction. Admittedly, her novels do present the lewd conduct of several women and men too. But her authorial objective is not glorification of smutty conduct, but a sincere attempt to trace the roots of objectionable moral conduct.

Shobha Dé posits that tradition, traditional standpoints, traditional familial roles, traditional stereotyping, traditional attitudes, traditional constraints and traditional weaknesses are responsible for the going astray of women in the first place and that, therefore,

women are predominantly victims of tradition. That this is her credo becomes clear when one studies her non-fictional works, wherein she has clearly and assertively recorded her beliefs and opinions on a wide range of societal issues, particularly those related to women and children.

These beliefs and opinions are not *sui generis*, but are the result of her keen observation of men and manners, of the little incidents that happened around her-even the most shocking events-and distilled from the experiences and the statements of her friends and acquaintances, which means that they are all based on real life and not figments of wild imagination or erotic fancy. Her authorial objective is not to titillate her readers, but to persuade them to draw cautionary lessons. So, her authorial mission is essentially salutary. She wishes to warn women-young and old-of the pitfalls that await their unwary feet, and parents of failing in their duty by their children. Dé is not a flippant pornographic writer, but a serious artist who illustrates her view of life with shocking incidents which are not figments of her prurient imagination, but facts from observed life. Her sane and salutary advice on living a good and balanced life should convince her severest critics of the good intentions that lie beneath the rather coarse layer of her fiction.

She is just a woman writer who feels very strongly about the problems faced by women. She empathises with such women. But she does not wave the feminist flag, as she herself has said. She is more interested in going to the root of the problems faced by women, not just the confrontation with the male of the human species. She is interested in basic issues like parental responsibility, bringing up children, the psychological and emotional security of children, economic and other kinds of deprivation, dependence and vulnerability, the impact of tradition and stereotyping on the

psyche and the lives of women, the wages of rebellion and so on.

It may be stated that most of Dé's critics are unable to see the forest for the trees. In "Two Aspects of Feminism: The Expressive and the Explosive in Shobha De," Sanjay Kumar says, "One recalls her admission of having a hidden agenda she explained in "Hard Talk" on BBC on 19 January 1999, as she said, "I don't know why there is so much of noise when a woman chooses to talk about sex" and that by projecting sex in such graphic details she "wanted to jolt the society in a way" (55-56).

One needs must ask oneself why a novelist, who has written eight novels, most of them bestsellers, wants to jolt the society. She must have a purpose and an authorial objective. It is quite clear that Dé sees herself as an established writer who has a duty to society. Having cultivated a large and faithful band of readers as a journalist and novelist, she finds herself in an ideal position to preach to the people. Having lived life to the full with two marriages and six children, she is an authority on the art of living. So Dé dons the mantle of a teacher offering the reading public lessons in the art of living—living fruitful and blissful lives. Finding society, particularly parents, children, men and women anchorless in a transitional ambience, Dé sets out to give them directions for a meaningful life. So, the present study has attempted to prove that Dé is a serious novelist whose authorial objective is didactic discourse. It has attempted to read the novels of Dé as didactic discourses warning children, girls, women, boys, men couples and parents against the snares that await their unwary legs as they march on the path of progress and development and the temptations that lurk in the distance as they step out into modern society.

There are critics who do not read rabid feminism or pornography into Dé's novels. They

take a positive stand and read welcome qualities in the characters of her novels'. In fact, Myles rounds off her argument with the categorical statement: "Shobha De reiterates the theory that a woman gets peace and security in the home of her husband" (92). The present study elects to look at this aspect of the novels of Dé and read them as didactic discourses warning children, girls, women, boys, men couples and parents against the snares that await their unwary legs as they march on the path of progress and development and the temptations that lurk in the distance as they step out into modern society.

In "Spelling It Out," Dé says, "Healthy communication needs clarity and honesty. Healthy communication is also a habit worth cultivating. Many marriages fail to invest in this very basic practice, till one day both partners wake up to discover they've actually got out of the habit of speaking freely to each other. Problems frequently begin at this very elementary level".(15-16).

In "Divorce and Be Damned," Dé says: "Finally, respect your own self and your decisions. Don't behave like a pathetic victim or that's how you'll be treated. Chin up and best foot forward. You have the rest of your lovely life ahead of you, honey! Enjoy it. You owe it to yourself".(85).

Dé, in her novels, sets out to teach parents the necessity of cultivating parental

sensitivity and responsibility in relation to their children lest they be driven to subterfuges and wrong company; she preaches to society against applying warped tradition and anachronistic stereotyping to children and adolescents lest they be tempted to shun societal encounters and take to personal idiosyncrasies; she warns families against allowing the children to suffer deprivation,

dependence and the resultant vulnerability; and finally, she cautions children, adolescents, and young men and women against rebellion *per se*, because there is always a day of reckoning awaiting every rebel. Her overall lesson is that the family is the safest fort for, women and children, and even men.

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