

Portrayal of the Self in Shobha De's *Selective Memory*: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Selective Memory: Stories from My Life, a candid memoir, reveals the true self of Shobha Dé behind the public persona. As a woman writer of autobiography she is unique in portraying her 'self' in the story of her life. The portrayal of self in *Selective Memory* happens through the intense scrutiny of men and women of urban elite class of metropolitan cities of India of which Shobha Dé is an integral part of. By delving deeper into the heart of each man and woman she encounters, she portrays her own 'self'. The persona in the self narrative is consistently confident, candid and *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life* is remarkable for its honesty.

Keywords- *Self portrayal, Celebrity, Womanhood, Patriarchy, Subjugation*

Introduction

Shobha Dé is one of India's most prominent writers. She is a model, a journalist, a socialite, a script writer and a bestselling novelist. *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*, a candid memoir, reveals the true self of Shobha Dé behind the public persona. The depiction of the self in the narrative takes place through the various roles she plays in society as a model, a high profile magazine editor, novelist, daughter, sister, wife and mother. As a woman writer of autobiography she is unique in portraying her 'self' in the story of her life. Being a true representative of vibrant India and a child of liberty with independent ideals and principles, her eyes focus more on the "the high-society hi-jinks, movie star follies, and celebrity neurosis" to describe her 'self' in the story of her life. Exposing the darker secrets of the urban elite class of India in her autobiography Shobha Dé, makes an effort to tell the story of her life to the readers. By projecting the status of modern urban elite men and women in the autobiography, Shobha Dé intends to bring a social change in the society of elites of which she is a part of it.

The portrayal of self in *Selective Memory* happens through the intense study of men and women of urban elite class of metropolitan cities of India, their obsessions, disappointments,

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insecurities, artificiality, and the inner fragmentation of their falsified life. By delving deeper into the heart of each man and woman she encounters, she portrays her own 'self'. Through her encounters with the people of public interest she presents herself as a person of contradictions: liberal yet traditional, arrogant yet simple. The autobiography is an answer to the patriarchal world that the New Woman of New India is not going to sustain pain, contemptuous rudeness, abuses, oppression and grievances. It abolishes the myth of woman as a subordinate, an obedient, and an ever smiling docile doll. She projects her as a daring daughter, a dependable wife, a responsible mother and an excellent team worker. *Stories from My Life*, is the result of independent choices she made, the decisions she took and it is the obvious result of the storms of struggles she faced in life. The persona in the self narrative is consistently confident, candid and *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life* is remarkable for its honesty.

The self account of Shobha Dé in *The Selective Memory* is very unique. In the story of her life the 'self' does not exist in isolation. Shobha Dé thinks about herself and recounts her story not in a narrow definition of one's existence as a part of a family but in a relation with the larger society which she is an integral part of. She reconstructs the idea of 'self' in relation with the social context. She honestly exposes society, especially urban society and its cravings. Shobha Dé portrays her as a woman who belongs to a particular period of Indian scenario and of a fast moving urban society. She unfolds her 'self' in the context of urban life and provides to her readers insights into the life of her time. Being a more contemporary, somebody who has lived in a metro city, she has chosen a way of chronicling the self with the voice of a modern feminist, totally different from the traditional definition of a woman's autobiography. This type of women's liberation from male domination in a self chronicling is so exclusive to her. She does not follow the conventional parameters of autobiography in her life narrative. She chronicles her 'self' peeping through the life of others.

The prologue in the memoir illustrates the incidents that inspired her to give an attempt to narrate her life story. Narrating the dilemma of a woman writer Shobha Dé says: "For a woman, a book in progress is like a secret lover she has to hide from her family...It's a guilty secret she can't share with anybody" (2). Being a person of herself, with independent ideas and free mindset Shobha De too faced gender discrimination in society especially as a writer. Yet the expression of the self is a major concern for her as "an unbearable pain reverberates through the entire body" (3).

The autobiography gives very selective glimpses into her personal life with her parents, siblings, husband and children; therefore the title chosen, *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*, justifies the content. She relates her 'self' with people more as a writer, model, and celebrity to the reader than a traditional Maharashtrian woman with a conventional designation of womanhood.

Birth of a girl child is considered an unfortunate incident in Indian families. Women writers, especially the women writers of autobiographies, recollect the day of their birth with an unpleasant note as she writes: "Unfortunately for my mother I was not the second son she'd prayed for" (12). Though born into a family with an educated background she was not exempted from the social injustice towards the birth of girl children. Shobha Dé recounts the arrival of her in the family as the third girl child, as an additional liability to her parents. She writes from the memory of her sister, Kunda: "Poor Kunda, at six, had no idea that it was only the birth of a son that called for celebration in my mother's family" (13). It is the social demand of a huge dowry expected from the girls' parents at the time of their marriage and the oppression they endured at their in-laws which make the family members anxious and distressed at the birth of a girl child.

Girls are over protected and given strict discipline in a patriarchal family set up. The elders of the family, especially the parents are the moral custodians of their girl children and they intervene in their every choice and decision making. The patriarchal moral standards on women compel the parents to be watchful over their girl children because women are expected to be the morality holders of a patriarchal society. In the 'self' narrative Shobha De gives an account of the protective life she had in the orthodox Rajsadyaksha Brahmin family. There were regular lessons of her father on "character building". She writes: "'Character building' my father would thunder, 'youth is meant for character building' " (30). One would wonder how a girl grew up with such restraints and conditions became an ambassador of women's cause. *Selective Memory* is a description of a simple obedient girl who made a different journey to establish a place and name for herself in society.

Gender discrimination is a major hindrance in the growth and development of a woman in a patriarchal society. It plays an important role in every sphere of a woman's life and obstructs her freedom of choice especially in the field of job opportunities. *Selective Memory* is an endeavour of Shobha Dé to narrate a story of challenges and success treading an untrodden road totally different from the traditional perspectives of her father. Social stigma associated with the glamorous field of modelling was a major issue for Shobha to reveal her new venture to her father who considered it "cheap and disreputable" (40). He says, "Young girls dream about becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers... It is not a career for decent girls. It is not a career at all" (42-43). Shobha did not choose any path to success on her own or by the compulsion of others but success chose her in every field that "happened" to her.

The self narrative is an opportunity for Shobha Dé to reveal to readers the world of modelling, the field of "falsies" as she says, "false nails, false eyelashes, false hair switches...the whole thing was fake, unnatural and comical"(38-39). While giving insights into the darker sides of the glamorous field of modelling which is "narcissistic and shallow" (54) the 'self' chronicling

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portrays Shobha De as a genuine and serious model who concentrated on the work assigned, that made her feature in internationally famous magazines like *Vogue* and *Time*.

The portrayal of the 'self' in detail happens to Shobha De when she started her career as an editor to three popular magazines *Stardust*, *Society*, and *Celebrity*. The magazines give a true picture of the celebrity world to Shobha, of which she too is a part of. She observes: "Movie people are incapable of normal feelings -- loyalty, friendship, caring" (126). Being a forerunner of the emerging Indian women with her liberated womanhood, Shobha Dé strongly opposes the male culture of subjugation and marginalization of women in every field of life, especially in celebrity life. Bringing the popular stars off screen to the truth of the daylight, she unfolds to the readers the true nature of the person with his/ her secret passions and obsessions. She describes the crude reality of the movie world through Rajesh Khanna, who hid behind the public mask his insecure and complex self; Shatrughan Sinha, a macho man by manners; Kabir Bedi, a self-absorbed human being; Zeenath Aman, clever, confident, successful, a quintessential sex-symbol and the 'wife number two' of Sanjay Khan. Shobha De recounts the precarious situation of women in the star world by bringing to light the relationship between Sanjay Khan and Zeenat Aman which ended with the public humiliation of battered and bruised Zeenath Aman. The friendship Shobha De shares with Zenith Aman, in the moments of her survival struggle, is one of the examples of female bonding in her life story.

The moral life of the celebrities Shobha De depicts is totally opposite to the life that they represent on the screen as she observes, "the movie business is full of 'shameless' people" (188). Hema Malini, a proud Brahmin girl who was in the dirty business of movies, lived a life of her own. Shobha Dé appreciates her courage as she observes: "I will live life on my terms and be answerable to no one" (157). The self narrative of Shobha Dé unfolds the reality of urban society, the centre of culture and progress in modern terms. She describes the veracity of metro life, the whimsical behaviour of the elite people and celebrities who are incapable of developing healthy, impeccable and lasting relationships. Her writings give emphasis to intellectual breakdown of the contemporary society that prioritises power, money and fame over intellectual achievements. The urban metro life and the lives of celebrities are important for Shobha Dé to chronicle them in her 'self' narrative because she too belongs to the same culture. Her observations on the lives of limelight present her as a personality with difference.

Selective Memory is a life narrative of Shobha Dé as a successful woman. Success is the end result after numerous failures in life. Only once in the autobiography Shobha Dé expressed her distaste for life, when she was battered financially and emotionally. It was when her marriage was breaking up and *Celebrity*, the magazine she published, faced problems. She writes, "For the first time in my adult life I felt alone, alienated, and isolated" (203). Success is a decision and Shobha Dé

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determined to win swimming against the tide all alone. She does not care to look back to the discouraging phases of her life in detail in her autobiography. Emphasise is on her solo journey towards success, the journey she had chosen to make as her own person since the age of seventeen as a model, columnist and a novelist. The story of her life is a reflection of modern society's hunger for success despite the odd realities of life.

Shobha Dé describes her 'self' in the autobiography through the convictions and morality she developed in her close association with the urban metropolitan elite class people especially women, the models of her novels. Being a writer of woman's causes, Shobha Dé gives importance to women equality, liberation and emancipation in her writings. She does not conform to the patriarchal morality imposed on women in her personal life. The woman she represents in the autobiography and the women she portrays and in the novels are not the traditional women who remain within the confined fulfilling their wifely obligations. They are confident, courageous and unbeatable. The life of Shobha Dé as narrated in the autobiography is similar to the life of Zeenat Aman who says "I will survive... Call that my anthem" (112). There are moments she felt beaten and crushed but she was not ready to give up as she says, "Even with everything collapsing around me, I managed not to let it daunt me to the point of powerlessness. I soldiered on cheerfully" (203).

Shobha Dé perceives her 'self' in the autobiography mainly as a writer who is an observer of lives around her. The self she narrates in the life story is constituted of what she writes as a creative writer and how does she associates it with her life. As a novelist Shobha Dé portrayed the true picture of modern metropolitan life, family, society, life-styles and thoughts in her novels. Her novels, observes Shashi Kant Gupta, "expose the hollowness of Indian urban life, family and society, particularly about urban women. In fact, her novels simply represent the true state of city life, which is the mark of human civilization" (4). Shobha Dé's novels are true representations of urban woman's life. Patriarchal societies oppress women and their endeavours for the protection of their rights and personal development. The protagonists of her novels challenge male domination and the accepted notion of female nature as mere objects. Karuna, in *Sociate Evenings*, a representative of modern New Woman, liberates herself from the bond of an "empty" marriage and opts for single life. Asha Rani is a woman emancipated who choose her own moral code of behaviour in the novel, *Starry Nights*. Shobha Dé imparts the theme of women empowerment in the novel *Sisters*, through Mikki and Alisha. Shobha Dé's fictitious characters are based on some real life story. Ravindra Nath Shukla reaffirms it in his interview with her: "Subjects of my books are my own which I pick up from the people around me, my writing is based on ideas. I don't write to harm society. The rotten inside of society may be our subject" (1).

Shobha Dé gives a restrained depiction of her personal life in the *Selective Memory*. Though Shobha Dé has a strong faith in marriage, she selectively evades such a significant chapter of life from her own 'self' narrative. It is from a casual reference to "Shobha Khilachand, the wife of a business man"(196) that one becomes aware of her marriage. In an interview to Nandini Guha of *The Saturday Statesman*, she expresses her view about marriage as: "A bad marriage kills love, a good one can enhance it" (3). Marriage has little sense in her observation on the life of celebrities and in her own fictional world but it has an important place in her personal life as she says, "I happen to like being married. I believe in marriage. I enjoy being a wife" (475).

India has been a patriarchal society and it does not show any signs of change in its patriarchal based moral values that support male antagonism. Divorce is an offence in any patriarchal society especially when it is a woman's initiative or with her consent. Shobha De chooses not to voice and defend her 'self' and position regarding their divorce which was a decision by "mutual consent", (474) in her autobiography, except for a statement that she makes cautiously, leaving the rest to her readers to assume. She says, "I had asked for nothing-- just freedom" (417). In a patriarchal society woman is blamed and ostracised for the breaking up of a marriage and she loses all the support systems from every side, including her family members. Shobha De recollects, "I wasn't welcome in my father's home except as an occasional visitor" (204).

Children are the silent victims and losers in the bitter and strangled relationships of their parents. Shobha Dé does not deny the hurt they caused to their children by mutual recriminations and arguments. Shobha Dé has an open heart and hands to embrace her life, the children of her second husband, Dilip Dé along with her own.

Shobha Dé cherished the values inculcated in her by her family. The 'self' she is narrating in the autobiography is constructed from the strong bond she developed with the members of her family. The influence of her parents and siblings in the building of her 'self' is chronicled repeatedly in the narrative: "I have never been lonely as a child. And I've never been lonely as an adult. The family has always been there to lean on, talk to, laugh with, even cry with" (409) and "I feel very contained and complete within the family fold" (415). She valued family more than anything in this world. It is erroneous to believe that a metro urban woman, a public figure, a celebrity, and a writer who regarded family less essential in the writings, especially in the fictional world, places family as the major priority in her life. This is the complexity of being an urban woman who holds traditional values and this complexity has been chronicled in the 'self' narrative.

Shobha Dé rejects the label of being a 'feminist' as a writer. She says, "As a writer, I am concerned with humanity at large. I hate bringing gender into it. I am not a social reformer"(3). The self chronicling is a proof of her being a practising feminist, in her thinking and acting. Responding to

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an interviewer who had asked her, "How would you like to be remembered?" she said, "As someone who dared"(531). The statement is clear evidence to acknowledge her as a woman who stood for her own rights throughout her life without conforming to the norms of patriarchal society. Shobha Dé has a totally different perspective on the status and emancipation of women. She is aware of the miserable position and craving of urban rich women in India and she expresses her deep concern for them in the autobiography:

I fear for my generation of women-- they are like dangles, neither here nor there. They definitely don't want to be like their mothers (why not, I ask you? and they desperately want to switch places with their daughters (what for, I ask you?) (414).

She regarded herself a "middle class" and (521) "traditional" (531) woman who represented her culture, tradition and nation and is always "hungry for the experience"(518) and "learning"(519). The liberation of woman, she believes, is possible only through intellectual perseverance. Shashi Kant Gupta observes her opinion as she expresses, "I feel education and economic independence are key to women's existence" (15). She gives emphasis on intellectual exploration, because the women of today are with an attitude of, as she observes, "I want to be famous" (227) "making megabucks for doing very little" (225).

Selective Memory: Stories from My Life, the autobiography of Shobha Dé is a revolt against the patriarchal authority that defines the position and status of woman in a male dominated society. From her elaborate and direct description of the celebrity lives to her restrained representation of family life she exposes her liberated self. The feminism Shobha Dé brings forth in the self chronicling is totally different from the women writers of her times. She tries to liberate women from the clutches of patriarchal norms and practices being a person of oneself in one's decisions and choices; searching for power within; depending on one's own inner resources and strength in times of struggles. Shobha Dé does not write a story of survival in her autobiography; it is a story of a successful woman. Through her autobiography, the women of India are invited to live a life of success. She does not allow her women protagonists to survive within the troubled marriages; she sets them free from the suffocating loveless marriages as she releases herself from her own strangled relationship with her first husband, Mr. Kilachand. Shobha Dé gives equal freedom for her women characters to decide their life, to make their choices as she does with her own. Her liberated mind does not permit her to depend on anyone in the hard times of her life; the complete failure of her magazine, *Celebrity*, and her second marriage with Dilip Dé are the examples of these. Chronicling her 'self' in association with the celebrity 'selves', with whom she is in association with more than her family members, she describes how women are swayed by the rich appearance of celebrity men and used and misused later in their power control. Being a celebrity by herself, she takes all opportunities that came on her way

to empower herself against all kinds of oppression. Exposing the wicked lives of heroes and heroines off the screens, Shobha Dé instructs the women of the modern times to be heroines of the nation through hard work. Shobha Dé, evolves a new type of feminism for the women of modern India, wherein, she encourages women to explore their *shakti* and to be in their own power for the furtherance of over all human development.

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