

Faces of the New Eve: Chick Lit and Social Reality

Dr. Arpit Kothari

Assistant Professor, Department of English, JECRC University, Jaipur

Abstract

This paper is about the urban women of this era who are bold and beautiful and ready to achieve any goal either with talent or with charms. These women are enjoying the fruits of the liberty which they have found after a long struggle against this patriarchal world and are still moving on. In this postmodern era, these post-feminist women challenge the conventional system by accepting the challenges for their rights. But this time the challenges are a bit different from the previous ones. This paper has taken two bold women writers Shobha De and Advaita Kala to illustrate the endeavors through their writings.

Keywords: Urban women, Power, Dominance, Liberty, Chick Lit, Feminist discourse, Subalternity, Stereotype, Indian Womanhood, Education

The roles that the women are playing in the twenty first century India are phenomenal. They have come a long way from being just a daughter, a wife, a mother, two potent forces that are shaping the country. They have crossed the threshold of their homes and stepped out into different professions that are significantly important for the economics of the country. Everyone is aware of Indira Nooyi, Swati Piramal, Falguni Nayar, Chandra Kochar and their likes who have carved niche for themselves and are taking full advantage of the fruits of globalization. This has been possible because of education which has given this new found independence. They now have a room of their own from the vantage point of which they speak a language of Independence. This was echoed many decades ago by Simone de Beauvoir, who had said that “the independent women is one who like men can move from immanence to transcendence in her public life activities and avoid sadomasochistic relationships in her personal life” (670). This comes from her feminist treatise *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she has ripped apart the veneer of the prevailing social order and has tried to instill that sense of grit and rebellion in women that is needed to fight against male hegemony. Culminating the

long standing debate begun by writers such as Margaret Fuller in the nineteenth century, Beauvoir also asserts that women can only free themselves by “thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as men” (727). It is obvious that thought is changed by education and the ability to work and create comes from the power that is thus generated.

Earlier, because of unawareness and primarily due to traditional bondages women had willy-nilly agreed to subordinate themselves; and because of their lack of resources had taken the unequal distribution of power between man and woman as being predestined. Susan Moller Okin in *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989) sums this up very succinctly

When we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities, for self-development, and both physical and economic security constructed inequalities between them, right down the list.(136)

What has happened today has been a redistribution of resources which has enabled a woman to gain a semblance of equality and shaken the shackles of dominance. Due to their strident endeavor to get out of the subaltern syndrome, women today are also breaking the walls between the object and the subject position. It was this that was the root cause of their oppression and clearly, linked to their body and to sexuality. Such notions are now being reconceptualized. But this is true of urban, middle class working women alone and we restrict to those and the texts referred to are by and about this seeming minority. We say *seemingly* because the reality of new India is that a much larger percentage of women are working than is statistically recognized.

Women continue to play a marginal and peripheral role despite constituting almost half the population with a critical role in production and social processes. The initiative taken by the early social reformers did resolve certain basic issues about the socialization process which resulted in better opportunities for education, employment, earnings, empowerment and entitlement to property, but still there is a long way to go and the fight against the long standing prejudices has yet not been resolved. Women in India still face enormous pressure to conform to social mores and the need to conform to traditional roles within families poses a barrier. Though women have made great strides in the corporate world in the last three decades, they are still too often discouraged from having careers that infringe too much on family life. On the other hand, it is also true that women who have achieved academically and economically are seen to be smart and savvy, often not in a positive way. Working women from the lower classes often take their economic independence too literally and

fall a prey to violence, but harassment at the work place is a pan-global phenomenon and India have its share of the evil. However, there is another side to the question. It is widely observed that earning power has allowed women to find a voice and form opinions of their own; women are increasingly becoming aware that a career will not cost them the neglect of their family and children but allow them greater power to spend not only on others but on themselves as well.

The new situation in which Indian women are now finding themselves in has made them more vocal about their experiences and writing about their felt worth has changed over the years. Gone are the days when women had to write under pseudonyms or write what was expected of them. Today, women can talk about anything and write it as easily. From Baby Halder, a domestic help who transcribes her life (*A Life Less Ordinary* 2006), the harshness of growing up- oppressed to Ravathi, a hijra telling the truth about herself, to Sagarika Ghosh, a journalist (*The Gin Drinkers* 1998) who writes about her experiences as does Barkha Dutt to others from different professions the writerly scape is growing every day. There are those who have received acclaim as novelists in their own right such as Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapoor, Gita Hariharan, Jaishree Mishra, Kiran Desai, and those who are in different professions and translate their experiences into the printed page for the world to recognize their being and becoming.

Women writers are a major force to reckon with and form a good seventy per cent of English writing in India. This was largely because of the opportunities that women have been given and the reforms enacted in the past couple of decades, especially in the field of education. As a result of promoting women's education more and more girls belonging to the middle class graduated and entered into the job market. Undoubtedly, they were subjugated and not only were the women's jobs considers secondary to the men's but also they were economically not at parity with the men's job- Nurses, teachers, stenographers and bank clerks was what they began with but gradually the new working woman made her mark and today through several years of agitation, litigation and gender sensitization as well as sexual harassment she has acquired a status of her own and at parity with her working counterparts. Today it seems that in India gender has become irrelevant in the new professions and as the world opens up wider and wider opportunities are increasing for those who have made ambition their prime goal in life. The old struggles are now irrelevant to the new age women and it seems that the Indian woman has definitely come of age. If we look at the writing and the publishing industry in India we witness a sea change, a complete face-over. Women are gathering

more laurels and their work are being appreciated for the precision, the meticulousness and the added humane touch which has delivered more goods than even before.

Travelling down the history lane from a Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt through the wide-reigning realm of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande to the now overly popular Diasporic writers on the one hand and 'chick lits' like Shobha De on the other, one is appalled by the quantum of output. And today in the era of *Metro Reads* one finds women from different professions trying to make a new mark through the narration of their diverse experiences- a woman from the media writing her reportage, a bank CEO, a head of a food industry, from the science and technology sector, from those in the upcoming call centers, everyone has a lot to lend to the feminist discourse of the day.

Shobha De is perhaps the first woman writer to write about the man - woman relationship with our inhibitions. Of Course there is Kamala Das who, through her poems and her *My Story* brought out the hypocrisy that pervades all human relationships. De differs from Das in the sense that De is more familiar with the darker side of the so called sophisticated section of society which parades as a decent crowd when there is sunshine. The sunset brings about a great transformation in social actions and cosmetics take over in bright lights or in more fashionable candle lights. Morality takes a back seat and people become shadows. De is familiar this world and she watches everything and writes beautifully about the women who have decided to refuse to continue with the conventional patterns of sexuality, subalternity and gender specific roles and attains sexual independence by moving against sexual subalternity.

Whatever Shobha De has portrayed, she has done it with a conviction that the readers may have a real feel of the life of people who are rich and powerful. In fact De's women are contemporary, urban; middle-class Indian ladies who are not out with a sole aim to overthrow the establishment or the social system in order to grab power. They are a set of well-equipped women- filthy rich, well-educated, talented, and unbelievably ambitious. These women are calculative and use men as means to an end, the end being a fulfillment of their aim to become rich, famous, and independent, as her novel *Snapshots* has rearranged the equation of the power game wherein woman either controls power or is in a position to ignore the prescriptions of male authority. The drama of the novel has the backdrop of Bombay in the last decade of the present century. None of the critics have analyzed the novel in light of Shobha De's women struggles of attaining economic independence while

moving against economic subalternity. Historically, thematically, economically and culturally *Snapshot* depicts woman against subalternity.

A very striking group of new modern women is emerging stealthily in Indian aristocratic society, which De presents in her novels with enthusiasm and creative energy. Her women in the novels show a continuation of similar behavioral traits of the new women. They are all daring women and have lots of stamina to face the stress and strain of the high society they live in. They are not afraid of facing every brick thrown in their way in their endeavor to lead lives on their own terms. Power, money, and fame are the three biggest aspirations of these women.

Let us extend the argument raised by Shobha De to women who are working and single as in the case of Advaita Kala's novel *Almost Single* which takes up the issues related with the hotel industry of today. The book is a racy rehash of the Bridget Jones' Diary, where the life of a twenty-nine year old career woman battling weight, wavering between self-esteem and hangovers and woefully complicated love life, captures the imagination of the readers. She typifies the hyperactive single woman in a big city who has to 'make it' in a man's world. She drinks, smokes, takes up challenging assignments is always on the verge of nervous breakdowns, and is a very conceivable stereotype of a guest relations manager in a five star hotel. Though almost irreverent of Indian womanhood, it is a reflection of the growing confidence of women working in metropolitan cities. The very fact that they are away from home and inhabit two worlds- the cosmopolitan city and the absolutely westernized ambience of a five star hotel- gives them a freedom that very few in India can think of. Their motto seems to be 'to enjoy life is empowerment'.

Like Pope's heroine Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, eleven o'clock is too early to get up after a particularly dense hangover. This is Aisha Bhatia, Guest Relations manager who's 'most nights these days are girl's nights out'. She is an avowed alcoholic. She simultaneously tolerates her job, hates her boss, annoys her X, bonds big time with friends Misha and Anushka and routinely suffers umbilical cord whiplash. As part of her work she meets the rich, the bold and the beautiful (ugly as well), dines at five star luxury hotels, stays in them during her travels, can name old and new world wines with élan. Though well paid, her salary gets sucked by her breezy lifestyle.

The case that Advaita Kala's novel *Almost Single* makes though indirectly is that a good, profession oriented education is a key to a better life. The social, political, filial and even biological wrongs done to women which the women accepted and tolerated quietly not because they were not gritty or

defiant, but because, being ignorant, illiterate and uneducated they had not been able to recognize these as wrongs at all. A woman can recognize her own worth, can identify her need to be an individual in her own right, and assert herself in her own independent capacity only when she is educated. Education is the weapon she can use to fight the war of inequality between the illiterate and the educated. Education is the ornament that beautifies a woman forever and knows no barrier of age, race, class, or status. Education is the ticket that allows a woman to proceed on the journey towards economic independence. Education helps in raising the status of women in four ways. Education helps a woman to (1) earn an income in later life; (2) participate actively in public life; (3) determine her own fertility; and (4) achieve personal autonomy. The educated woman has both the choice and the bargaining power in getting a job and salary, unlike her uneducated sister. She can also exercise a choice about the location of the job in the sense that she may or may not choose to go out of the home in order to get productive work. The fact remains that the higher the level of education attained by a woman, the more likely is she to enter and remain in employment for a longer period.

Getting back to the polemics that Simon-de-Beauvoir floated with *The Second Sex* (1949) about women not being biologically but socially the other, chick lit dwells largely on the extremes of otherness that educated, urban young women can fall a prey to. In order to profess difference gendered entities like Aisha, Misha and Anushka flaunt their sexuality, which becomes the hallmark of women in 'show' spaces. They affirm to the notions projected by the French feminists regarding sex and sexuality, the cultural agenda of radical feminism.

Works Cited

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex, (Le Deuxieme Sexe 1949)*. Ed. and Trans. H.M. Parshley. London: Picador, 1988. Print.
- De, Shobha. *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1988. Print.
- Kala, Advaita, *Almost Single*. Noida: Harper Collins, India, 2007. Print.
- Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender and the Family*. New York: Basic Books. 1989. Print.