



**Dissimulation, Narcissism and Schizophrenia: Symbolic Narratives of Late
Capitalism in Shobhaa`De's Novels**



Namratha Mogaral (First author)

Professor of English, Department of English
Kuvempu University, Shankaraghatta-577451
Email: namrathamogaral@gmail.com



Sheela Ramagiri (Second author)

Ph D Scholar, Department of English
Kuvempu University, Shankaraghatta-577451
Email: sheela.ramagiri@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that De uses the seventies' Hindi film formula plots such as doubling of characters, i.e. Ram aur Shyam or Sita aur Gita plots, puranahaveli narratives – and – gender – scripting – for providing a symbolic structure to her stories. It reads her novels at a symbolic allegorical level rather than realistic. This reading is especially focused on the novels Sisters and Strange Obsession but also covers Starry Nights and Sultry Days. Secondly, set in the modern day twentieth century capitalist milieu De's novels are

especially focused on a critique of the progress of neo-nationalist neo-capitalism in the Indian context and that their symbolic structures are directed to this purpose. Her stories characterize these capitalist forces as ridden with narcissism, schizophrenia and dissembling in a media driven world of the hyperreal.

KEY WORDS

symbolic narratives, realism, formula Hindi film, doubling of character, haveli narrative, gender script, neo national, neo capitalism, feminine, narcissism, schizophrenia, dissimulation.

RESEARCH PAPER

Shobha De whose literary career covers some seven novels, three short story collections and a series of five memoirs published in the span of two decades from 1986 when her writings were first telly-serialized upto the last decade of the twentieth century remains a prolific but singular author and neglected not because she lacks popularity but because critical response to her writings remains rudimentary and simplistic. The high-brow literary critic has simply rejected her and relegated to the mindless mass culture. Much of her oeuvre is dedicated with a single minded consistency to the show business, specifically the Hindi cinema, beauty industry and the journalistic or mass media in India located in Mumbai city. As she has expressed it herself, her interest lies precisely in the interest of the twentieth century masses, the glittering world of celluloid and allied. Perhaps owing to this her novels have been again and again interpreted as “realistic” depictions of showbiz, albeit the Indian Bollywood film industry, even often relating the plots to the thrilling real private life of some actor or the other, presumably on the basis of her own involvement there.

On the contrary it must be remembered that literary texts are artistic constructs. The writer uses real life experiences just as a bricoleur would use discarded bricks and debris of any demolished building as his raw material. The Mumbai film world gives De raw material of a different sort. The typical Bollywood film provides De with formula plots and character stereotypes which she uses effectively to draw a moral about contemporary life. By all estimate De is a conservative in her ideological slant even though her brand is thawed by her liberal feminism which at its source is pro-capital. Thus if one perceives any “will to truth” in De’s fiction it is the moralist rather than the realist. In keeping with this axiom, this paper proposes to read her novels as symbolic narratives drawn from the period Hindi blockbusters, and that they present allegories of the twentieth century late capitalism. It is premised in this article that De’s oeuvre charts the progress of neo-nationalist neo-capitalism in twentieth century India with Mumbai as its venue and provides a critical perspective on its impact on the Indian social character. In all her novels which we divide into two sets (see next paragraph) provide the topography of Indian capitalism from several vantage points, the domestic or the private sphere of home and family, the public or national, and the international or global advancement.

Several types of symbolic narratives structure De’s novels, all of them without exception drawn from the typical Bollywood movie of the 70’s. The first one and the leading structure is the playful narrative of the twinning or doubling of character, interestingly a trend that was set by a female centric seventies Hindi film *Sita aur Gita*, but which became popular motif in many of male albeit *Ram aur Shyam* plot starrers also, chiefly in the image of confrontation between the good twin and the lost twin who went bad. This structure is present in Strange Obsession (1992), Sisters (1992), Sultry Days (1994) and even Starry Nights (1992). These novels form a cognate set, separately from her other novels such as Socialite Evenings, Second Thoughts and Snapshots. These two sets differ in the capitalist locale, the latter set show the workings of capitalism in the domestic sphere of home and family while the first group are set in the public world, even though the symbolic plot come into play in both sets.

This plot structure allows her to explore the schizophrenic duplicitous rationalized processes (structures) of capitalism which is source of the typical capitalist conflict between

good, bad and ugly. For instance in Sisters we find a whole set of legitimate and illegitimate human relationships constructed around the sisters Mikki (Mallika) and Alisha one of whom is illegitimate (Alisha) progeny of the capitalist father Bacchoobhai Seth, and which allegorize the good capital (legitimate money) and the bad capital (illegitimate progeny nevertheless). Alisha lives a secret life with her crazed mother who is choreographed in the image of a tawaif as Bacchoobhai's mistress. In Strange Obsession the motif good-versus-evil is more straightforward. Here it is worked out in the opposition posed between Amrita the good character type who is geared for a successful and well deserving (on the basis of personal merit) modeling career by legitimate means versus the unscrupulous Minx (Meenaxi daughter of a police officer) whose anxieties and insecurities do not allow her these means. This conflict of the good and the bad because it is relegated to the realm of the irrational and primitive, is configured as the feminine, so much so Shobha De's novels become dominated by the women (or woman-like) characters that are less real and more the site on which the conflict is played out. Thus in Sisters Mikki is given to cross dressing wearing a man's pants always representing her affiliation with capital. In parallel, the depiction of homosexual lesbian relations in Strange Obsession has a symbolic level of meaning as the narcissistic temper of the age, especially the self-absorption that show biz provides to all its participants, the stars as well as their fans. There is no doubt that De's chief interest lies in the pursuit of truth of our lives; but her claim to realism ends there, for she takes recourse to symbolic form to get at it because it is the very psyche underlying our times, the structure of thought that underlies it that she is after. Therefore, her novels are amenable to symbolic interpretations even psychoanalytical reworking of the themes.

D. M. Levin in his famous book Pathologies of the Modern Self (1987) characterized the twentieth century modernity dominated by the mass media and consumer capitalism as fundamentally narcissistic and schizophrenic. Schizophrenia is especially a 20th century ailment which is also known as borderline disorder in which the character of the patient shows duplicitous nature by the projection of multiple personas often contradictory and therefore incoherent. Unlike other mental disorders (such as psychosis and paranoia) it is not traced to the unconscious repression (i.e. depth psychology of drive protocols) but to overt social repressions and failures in achieving one's desires by legitimate means. In the twentieth century, capitalism has entered a phase of impasse; the first two phases of honeymoon capitalism of the earlier eras having given way to decadence and end of the road checkmate. We are thus confronted with the failures of the economic system even while the ideologues take recourse to promises of the infinite possibility of the humankind. The mad rush to achieve the goals of capitalism and make it successful has lead inevitably to a pathological public sphere which en masse may be characterized as duplicitous or schizophrenic and full of violence, war, crime and aggression. Schizophrenia is therefore normative condition of late capitalist societies.

A whole range of contemporary Marxist thinkers have similarly observed the corruption of advancing capitalism and the duplicitous nature of rationalized capitalist processes, such as Ernest Mandel, Ann Douglas, Jurgen Habermas, and Jean Baudrillard. Ernest Mandel writes of the loss of human values and the domination of technological rationality, while Habermas points out that the market-driven mass media transformed the modern public sphere into pseudo speech communities that exist for the show merely. Baudrillard has a most interesting account in this regard; according to him the first phase of modern capitalism was built around pure consumption of goods. That is to say in the earliest phase of modern capitalism the consumption of goods was based on realistic needs. In the twentieth century we enter a new phase of modern capitalism which transformed this realism

into symbolic consumption when we consumed goods for their symbolic or cultural values that attached to them. But as we advance into the age we have begun to consume pure symbols, surrogate dummies for the goods themselves in the form of hyperreal.

De's novels represent many of these global themes of capitalist aspirations telescoping in the desperate faith in the plenitude of human sexuality, and the plasticity of the human body. She thus depicts characters in schizophrenic forms as self and its alterity. In her novels every other character may exist in various combinations of opposition, the simplest being Minx versus Amrita, Binny versus Mikki, Deb versus Nisha, oppositions that I have elaborated upon in this paper. Further on as I argue next, her novels ironically map the entire schizophrenic Indian ethnic terrain populated multiply with the Vermas, Seths, Mehtas, Malhotras, Bhais, Sens, Behras, Boses, Ghoshes, Kuriens, Bhandaris, the endless diversity of cultural identities of the numberless castes, creeds and religions that fracture our public consciousness, a schizophrenic split neo-nationalist Indian ethos as it were and worst all of them players in the same capitalist field.

Schizophrenia is the ability to project a duplicitous self; in other words it is a kind of dissembling or dissimulation of identities. Baudrillard who wrote extensively on the conditions of contemporary capitalism also coins the word (dis)simulation to understand the ethos of our times. In his book titled *Simulation et Simulacres* (1980) he relates the stages in the advancement of modern capitalism to the changing forms of consumerism from the pre modern ages to the late twentieth century postmodernity; this as given by the logic of capitalism that either there should be new market or there be new goods or at the last instance at least new symbolisms, or else there would be a collapse of the capitalist economy. For Baudrillard as late capitalism proceeded the social is continuously replaced with the purely cultural (symbolic forms). This has reached such an impasse that the symbolic today has taken form of a purely simulated image-world, that he labels as the hyperreal or simulacra of a possible real world. He further defines the hyperreal as a psychological category and as aspect of the communal psyche.

In the simulated world ideas, objects, and people have existence as dissembling, i.e. as imitations or pretenders of a possible world of real. In his diagnosis this replacement of the real with a world of duplicitous images or dissimulation is owing to the way visual technologies (camera, photograph, film, TV etc) have dominated our lives in the twentieth century and how they shape our socio cultural arena today. This is precisely where De's neo-nationalist neo capitalist world of characters is located. She of course gives the insider's view the place where the hyperreal gets constructed, by the film makers, cameramen, photographers and the newsmakers. Her characters participate in this dilemmatic world of late capitalism reproducing it to the hilt. They, Amrita, Aasha Rani, Deb, Nisha and the whole gamut become obsessed with transforming themselves into beautiful media images and so do their lives.

Schizophrenia is a condition associated with loss of depth (deep character) where the patient denies his inner moral self (i.e. super conscious). It indicates the absence of sense of deep self, which is replaced by the impulse for multiple personality facades for fulfilling one's unending desires. It is a condition of depthless where the person loses his interiority in attempting to optimize the desired. Similarly, Baudrillard also points out the depthless quality of any simulated world of objectification, as the objects don't actually refer to anything that really exists. There is another comparable condition of depthless, i.e. narcissism where the self becomes its own desired object and loses all subjectivity. Twentieth century culture is

characterized by narcissism too. Thus De's characters display the narcissism located as they are in the world of the mass medias, of films and advertisement.

Coming back to my discussion on the symbolic structures of De's novels, a second type of symbolic narrative structure that she works with is again drawn from Hindi films, the spooky *haveli* (mansion or palace) plot with its equally ghostly castigated heroine full of secrets, and a touch of the tragic, twentieth century Indian version of the globally popular medieval Gothic formula. In novels Sisters and Sultry Days this formula allows her to pose the current struggles that exist between the pre-modern colonial structures of economic, political power and its stakeholders vis-a-vis the emergent twentieth century liberal capitalist players. By this her novels become populated with characters that may be grouped into two sets, the traditional set such as of the older ruling class, the quaint aristocrat, then the allied professional banker, the feudal bureaucrat, the business man, the strongman or muscleman, the retainer and the whole paraphernalia of lesser cadres that belong to this set. The opponent set covers the new yuppie business & banker class, the techno-geek (for example the photographer), the demagogue (several types of them including politician, labor unionist and the journalist), the goon or police, the PRO, the filmstar, the model and a whole retinue of jobbers that make the hyperreality of our contemporary modern-day money-capital driven culture. Both these sets of characters are essentially stereotyped or else they wouldn't serve the purpose of the symbolic plot or that of the moralist. This symbolic narrative also gives rise to schizophrenic violence with one set attempting to exterminate the other set in the bid for domination over the political economy.

In the novel Strange Obsession, which translates the *haveli* motif into the 20th century urban gothic formula, Meenaxi's anti-heroine who is both its wronged ghostly feminine victim as well as the stalking blood thirsty villain (ess) is owner of the spooky-*haveli*-turned-modern apartment with secret chamber and all where she hides her victim (Amrita). Typically she is the pathologic heroine with a sentimental story that turns out to be fake in the end and which challenges our attempt to identify her as a stereotyped feminine victim. Rather she represents the bad underside of capitalism that perforce drives the good on the surface. It is not lost on the reader that Amrita the good girl's modeling career would not have worked out but for the driving force of her alter-image Minx the bad girl. Lesbianism in this novel among other things seems to be index to the underlying libidinous exchange that entails all capitalist ventures, similar to the sexual exchange Aasha Rani engages in in Starry Nights under the driving force of her mother. Both these novels thus narrativize the deceptive capitalist processes which on the surface appear as rational and righteous.

With this we come to the third type of narrative structure that can be traced as the gender scripted plot or gender allegory, the feminine women and the masculine men, the rapist and the victim, the castigator and the castigated, the capitalist man and the consuming women. The idea of gender scripted plot structure originated in feminist discourses to talk about stereotyped sexual identity and relations between the sexes in patriarchal or male dominant cultures (see Sharon Marcus in Judith Butler & Joan W Scott (eds) (1992) but in De's novels is used in the service of critique of capitalism just as the other two symbolic plots I have explicated above. By use of gender scripting or masculine and feminine gender stereotyped stories De conveniently is able to chart the neo-nationalist neo-capitalist terrain. Insofar as the relation between real women and capitalism, it is observed that capitalism reinforces gender roles and gender labour divisions. We know Marx and Engels famous argument that traced the origin of the family and private property to accumulative economies and the privatization of woman in the domestic role as wife and mother. Feminist research

has shown that the rise of the household as the sentimental domain of women and the bipolarized gender roles is directly related to the impact of capitalism in the last four centuries. The advancement of capitalism is correlated to the exclusion of women from the economic sphere and the expansion of the feminized household as the consumptive.

Capitalism inherently posed a fundamental contradiction in that even while it promoted economic liberalism it enforced cultural conservatism. The culture of capitalism is die hard conservative and challenge to radicalism. Feminists like Betty Friedan posit that gender stereotype is pivotal to the capitalist economy which makes it hard for women to come out of patriarchal roles even in the public domains. Similarly Rosemary Pringle argues that capitalist processes are integrally gendered, such as capital and production are defined as masculine while labour and consumption as feminine and therefore is dominated by men. Women thus are faced with an existential contradiction because they cannot enter the capital sphere as women.

Further on, critics of capitalism such as Ernest Mandel and Ann Douglas have also argued that advanced capitalism tends to feminize the public sphere, since the accumulation of large capital inevitably leads to irreversible polarization of the stake holders into those who have capital and those who don't and maximizes dependence relationship. Mandel links this directly to the introduction of massive technologies which require huge capital (such as military, satellite and space etc). In their discourse the feminine is a state of insecurity and amorality (*maaye* as the Indian sages would have said). It is the point at which the rational logic of capitalism breaks down and causes chaos. Our interpretation of the feminine in De's plots must be thawed by this insight that it does not mark especially or merely women but is more a signal of the dissimulated identity. Feminists like Rachel Bowlby have argued the feminine identity is universally available for dissimulation because the feminine has always been understood by that which it does not possess.

What I mean is that it would be a limitation to read De's novels as merely about modern women and their problems. The sexual plot is not just about men and women but about the sexual structures of capital transaction. De uses gender stereotyped behavior to allegorize the corruption of capitalist processes. Just as I said earlier this corruption at the heart of all things capital is depicted in the realm of the irrational and primitive, and therefore is configured as the feminine, so much so De's novels become dominated by the women characters that are less real and more the site on which the corruption is carried out. The feminine in De is about contemporary femininity stereotyping and about the nature of evil in capital; it affects both men and women. For instance in Starry Nights the numerous sex-escapades of Aasha Rani its amazingly libidinous film star heroine and which includes lesbian affairs makes more sense to be read as symbolic depiction of the processes of exchange and circulation of value in capitalist economy. Aasha Rani participates in the economy of exchange each time she fucks the men, men who hold the capital that she craves; after all, money is key to her successful career as film star. And like Marx who famously used the imagery of prostitution and sexual exchange in his Das Capital, to understand the fetishized buying and selling and thereby production of value of goods in modern capital.

Sexual encounters in De's novels thus symbolize the various facets of capitalist exchange. Even for example in Sisters, Mikki's marriage to Binny Malhotra is a kind of capitalist make over if not an exchange. Mikki the pant-cladding legitimate heir to her father's capitalist empire courts several men such as Shanay and Navin before she actually is ensnared by Binny in a stormy affair ironically taken place in two separate colonial feudal

mansions. Binny is profiled as a yuppie, belonging to a new class of international businessmen who are replacing the desi old timers such as Ramanakaka (her father's brother). Shanay and Navin both Mikki's cousins and like her legitimate heirs to Indian capital are fairly dethroned by Binny's charming internationally funded courtship. Symbolically Shanay, Navin and Mikki inherit the *purana* haveli of Indian feudal capital from their parents, while Binny is the inheritor of international capital which is also configured as feudal and colonial symbolically in his strange Spanish castle located on an island in the Bombay seas and another one onshore.

Typically Binny is the masculine counterpart of Minx in Strange Obsession. He like other capital driven characters such as Minx in De's novels is presented as schizophrenic after all and victimizes Mikki. The comparison between these two novels is remarkably extensive. Amrita Strange Obsession's good heroine is daughter of a Delhi businessman just as Mikki is in Sisters. Amrita's flagging modeling career is uplifted by Minx's rapacious machination even though her personal life reaches a trough, just as Binny does to Mikki. His apparently rational approach to capital has made him play a sentimental con game in pursuit a wife whom he views entirely as an instrument for acquiring. Mikki who has inherited her father's business finds herself reduced to play toy and the company wrested out of her hands by her schizophrenic husband.

This novel particularly along with Sultry Days depicts the struggles not merely between the old and new capitalist classes, parent and children generations, but also the contest for capital between a desi-international brand i.e. a neo-colonial capital class, and a desi brand i.e. neo-nationalist neo-capital class (perhaps alluding to India's years of LPG policy) as signified by the characters Binny Malhotra, on one side and Shanay, Navin, Mallika and Alisha on the other. In Sultry Days Nisha true daughter of a desi business man named Verma is wooed by several men all engaged in capital, Anil Bhandari the yuppie, Deb wayward journalist son of a staunch communist, Iqbal the Urdu artist and the like. This gives a twist to the haveli motif in these novels and its theme of generation gap struggles I pointed out earlier.

International capital is killed of course, but by illegitimate means with the mysterious murder of Binny and his family by a first marriage leaving the Indian capital signified Mikki widowed and bankrupted. This introduces a specular *déjà vu* narrative plot; the novel has opened with the murder of Mikki's parents and now to the end her husband Binny in similar mysterious circumstances. The novel ends without revealing who actually was the murderer in either case, hinting at a nexus between the old timer Ramanakaka, and the young Shanay and Alisha; the older and the younger generations were not so different in kind after all and the family drama is patched up. In a great part of the novel Ramanakaka has been attempting to buy Mikki's inheritance for Alisha the illegitimate heiress and possible malcontent of this plot. But it is certain the neo-nationalist set emerge as victorious when there is a sinister reconciliation between the schizoid halves of Indian capitalism Mikki and Alisha; and the game starts all over again with the entry of yet another schizophrenic resolution in the form of yet another bad girl an obscure angry discarded mistress named Shobha possibly with international colonial connection. De's novels thus chart the character of twentieth century capitalism in the Indian context dominated as it were by the neo-nationalist neo-capitalist forces.

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