

Struggling with the Body: A Study of the Novel *Strange Obsession*

Dr. Naresh K. Vats, Assistant Professor
University School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
GGSIU University, Sec. 16 C, Dwarka, New Delhi – 110075
n_vats1969@rediffmail.com

Abstract: *Strange Obsession* tells about the obsession of a psychotic woman with an attractive young man. The article attempts to study the neurotic personality of Minx, the only and spoiled child of an Inspector General of Police, who ends up into a maniac and lesbian. She had a miserable childhood as a result of her father's transfers and her mother's social work. In this novel De has focused more on the psychopathological aspect of Minx's personality which has prevented the balanced development of her character. Her clever manipulation of her surroundings and her ruthless behaviour assume criminal dimensions. Like in her other novels, in *Strange Obsessions* too Shobha De brings out the absurdities of life in high-society of Bombay. De treats the subject of sex elaborately; the sadistic homosexual tendencies of Minx present the height of alternative sexuality.

Keywords: Sexuality, Obsession, Anxiety, Absurd, Neurotic, Introjections, Paranoia, Projection, sadism

I. Introduction

What Edward Albee says about the theatre of the absurd applies to a reasonable degree to Shobha De's novel *Strange Obsessions*. Explaining the concerns of the theatre of the Absurd he says that it deals with "man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense – which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed." (Albee, 1967:172) Shobha De is one of the most widely read Indian Novelists writing in English. *Strange obsession* is different from other novels of Shobha De which deal with the theme of refusal of Modern Indian women to carry the load of traditional morality and their liberation from the dictate of traditional male-chauvinated society. Shobha De's female protagonists successfully come out of their constricting environment. They stand tall and independent, and gracefully accept the responsibility of the outcome of their bold decisions.

Written in 1992, *Strange Obsession* discusses the pathological anxiety of Minx (Meenakshi). It describes how, under the overwhelming stress, she breaks down beyond recovery. Through her eccentricities she tries to avenge herself on the environment which is the source of her anxiety. The novel tells about the obsession of a psychotic woman, Minx (Meenakshi Iyengar), with Amrita, an attractive young girl who comes to Bombay (now Mumbai) to make her career in the world of modeling. Meenakshi's troubled and neglected childhood fills her over-bearing personality with hostility which turns Amrita's life nightmarish. To cope with the anxiety and insecurity which is the result of her isolated childhood and abuse by her own father, Minx takes to exploiting people. Dominating others becomes a permanent fixture in her personality. This finds expression in her treatment of Amrita over whose life she obtains total control forcing her into submission. Every time Minx finds Amrita helpless before her, she experiences a pleasure which compensates for her own anxiety.

Meenakshi's abnormal behaviour is the result of her neglected childhood, uncaring mother and tyrant father. In fact *Strange Obsession* is a case study of the neurotic personality of Minx, the only and spoiled child of Inspector General of Police, V.S. Iyengar. She had a lousy childhood as a result of her father's transfers and her mother's social work: "...only child, lonely child, boarding schools... you know.... I was thrown out of two schools... expelled. My mother was so ashamed. She didn't know how to face her

friends in the Bridge club. My father handled me the only way he knew. By belting me.... He stopped only after he saw the blood.” (43) Not only this, she reveals the worst part of her father's heartlessness. “listen....My father... yes... the same man who so powerful, so respected, so feared... is a beast. A beast of the worst kind. He ... he ... raped me.” (45)

Meenakshi's father presents the inverted image of king Oedipus who happens to commit incest quite consciously. He brainwashes Minx into agreeing for the Act saying that her mother has refused to have sex with him. He makes her believe that if her mother doesn't, she has to make him happy and it is her duty to fulfill his desire. Minx tells that “...I believed him. I thought that's how it was in other people's homes too...” (45) These events produce a mountainous level of anxiety in Minx who ends up into a maniac and lesbian. When her mother also comes to know about this relation, their (her parents) reaction comes as a shock to her which leads to further deterioration of her personality. Similarly, Meenakshi's homosexual behaviour with Amrita is the outcome of her sexual abuse by her own father which leads to the conditioning in which heterosexual behaviour becomes an ‘aversive stimulus’. The sexual relationship with her father turns her towards homosexuality as a safer ‘sexual outlet’.

Girls who have been raped by their fathers (and they are not rare among delinquent girls) find relationships with men either threatening or disgusting and often turn to other girls for the fulfillment of their emotional need for love. (Coleman, 1988:595)

The aggression in her behaviour towards those who appear as threat to her endeavours to attain safety or safe discharge of her anxiety is her effort to protect her security. Amrita is at the receiving end of all this. Minx does not stop at anything in order to remove all those who come near Amrita. She has no guilt whatsoever. On the contrary, she finds everything worth doing if it helps her attract Amrita's sympathy towards her as it would satisfy her neurotic need to be loved and to control other people's lives. This satisfaction of the need of love and belongingness would bring her sense of fulfillment and moments of self-realization. Her sadistic tendency also is the manifestation of her efforts to cope with her feelings of isolation and insecurity.

The efforts made by Minx to get closer to Amrita are her attempts to achieve fulfillment. Abraham Maslow, one of the major humanistic theorists says in this connection that a human being has an essential nature, a tendency to do what he or she is capable of doing. The people who are successful in making the fullest use of their capabilities are self-actualizers. The goals which they chase differ from person to person depending upon their individual nature. Having fulfilled her physiological needs and safety needs (being the daughter of an I.G. Police she has no threat to her safety) she strives to satisfy her need for love and affection.

Sense of belongingness and being loved has never existed in her life. Like in her other novels, in *Strange Obsessions* too Shobha De brings out the absurdities of life in high-society of Bombay. De treats the subject of sex elaborately; the sadistic homosexual tendencies of Minx present the height of alternative sexuality. Though she is not the first Indian woman novelist to deal with sex or lust, she is the first to cover all possible aspects of it in detail. By discarding all inhibitions she has completely bulldozed the conventional idea of literature in India.

The Indian writer Shobha De, ‘the Empress of Erotica’ (a title used by an Australian reviewer of her books: Singh, 1994:15), writes romance/sex novels just as steamy in their portrayal of sexual adventure as western fiction (for example *Starry Nights* and *Socialite Evenings*). But in De's books, the sexual expertise of Indian men and women contrasts with the tight, repressed western white woman. (Bulbeck, 1997:130)

It is just not only the others, Minx tortures herself too in order to fulfill her urges, she even tries to get rid of her breasts so that she can have a manly look and be acceptable to Amrita as a life partner. It is a state of utter anxiety that she is not comfortable with her own sexuality. To realize her whims of “alternative

sexuality” (113), Minx is ready to go for a sex-change operation and justifies it as a sacrifice for Amrita's sake as she claims in the case of reshaping her breasts. “Ok, hear this then ...I'm planning to undergo a sex-change operation. Yes, darling. I'll do it for you. You want a prick to enter you – I'll go out and get one. Money can buy you anything. I've always said. Even a bloody dick.” (110)

Meenakshi's efforts to justify her obsession and her weird acts are her defense reactions to protect herself from the threats like ‘devaluation’ and ‘guilt’. Her going for surgery in order to reduce her breasts just to get masculine look, is an abnormal step. The reasons she gives for it are based on ‘self-deception’ and ‘distortion of reality’. She tries to blame her father for everything; she blames her huge breasts for the repeated sexual encounters between her and her father. It is like a rapist who in order to escape the guilt, blames the inviting figure or revealing dress of the victim.

When I was a teenager, I used to try my best to tie them down. But...my father...yes...that pervert...he used to fondle them constantly and tell me how beautiful they were...I began to really hate my breast after that. Maybe I blamed them for whatever was happening between me and my father. I used to curse myself and think that had they been smaller this horrible thing would never have happened. (93)

Such behaviour is psychologically termed as *projection*, a defensive reaction by means of which others are seen as responsible for one's own misdeeds and abnormal impulses. In such an instance a delinquent teenager blames his/her parents and teachers for being recusant, indifferent and non-understanding. Blaming others is a way of coping with one's unwanted urges by shifting them on to someone else. Projecting the blames onto others goes to the extent that she becomes paranoid. In paranoia “People ... my project their own unacceptable hostile feelings about others into a whole system of thinking in which they feel that others are out to get them.” (Morgan et al., 1996:589) By projection or blaming others one can lessen the neurotic anxiety arising from the inner conflict. Regarding neurotic anxiety psychoanalytic theory says –

“because the id's unconscious demands are instinctual, infantile, and amoral, they must often be blocked by the ego and superego. Because of this conflict and the persistence of unsatisfied demands, *anxiety* (vague fearfulness) and guilt are aroused. The person then seeks ways to protect the ego from this anxiety and guilt by setting up defenses.” (Morgan et al., 1996:588)

In Minx's case, her delusions seem very logical and believable. She appears normal until something happens to activate her neurotic mood. Psychologists say that most people with such abnormality come from families with “authoritarian and excessively dominating, suppressive, and critical” (Coleman: 334) background which colours their feelings and behaviour towards the people in general. Their inadequate socialization prevents them from understanding the others' point of view. In their social relations their attitude is hostile, suspicious and dominating. They see in others “the weakness they cannot acknowledge in themselves”. (334) Minx too is conscious about her weakness of abnormal sexuality and projects others as ‘incapable’ by using words which connote ‘impotency’. She tells Amrita with an air of aggression that “instead of me it could be one of those *hijras*.” (Obsessions: 134) Her continuous suspicion that Amrita will escape her or someone will snatch her away from her raises the level of anxiety in her. Minx would be particularly insecure after watching Amrita interact with others, laughing, smiling, even flirting lightly. She would react violently abusing, accusing and cursing Amrita.

II. Effect of all this on Amrita:

Minx feels great in playing husband to Amrita. Amrita has to undergo many emotional disturbances because of Minx. Forced by Minx, she starts responding to Minx's homosexual advances which put her in a state of emotional crisis whether she will be able to live a satisfactory married life with a man, Rakesh Bhatia. Minx does her best to brainwash her and erase every possibility of a man in her life. In fact, Amrita's tacit surrender to Minx's eccentricities and bullying is the indication of her *introjection* of Minx's ways of life in order to safeguard herself against the neurotic anxiety mounting in her. *Introjection* is a defense reaction in which one accepts others' norms and value as one's own even when they are contrary to one's previous norms and values. It is similar to imitative learning when a child identifies with his/her parents. This identification is, actually, a defense mechanism which develops feelings of worth and protects the person against self devaluation. *Introjection* has been referred to as *identification with the aggressor* and is a defensive reaction that seems to follow the principle, *If you can't beat them, join them*. However, *introjection* may lead to seriously distorted and maladaptive behaviour.

Amrita tries to introject the strange ways of Minx so that she can avoid her neurotic reaction and absurd retaliation. However, it only adds to her miseries as she cannot completely identify with Minx's abnormal sexuality. Before meeting Rakesh Bhatia, Amrita seemed to have settled herself with Minx. The presence of Rakesh Bhatia poses a great threat to the weird (and seemingly secure) arrangement of Meenakshi's make believe world. The neurotic anxiety produced by this potential threat gives rise to a violent reaction in Minx. In a state of desperation she attacks Amrita in order to bring her back under her control and acquire the earlier state of security. She burns Amrita's eyelashes and pubic hair in order to terrify her. She does not stop at this and shoves some hard and long object into her vagina. She follows Amrita and Rakesh even after their marriage and succeeds in kidnapping Rakesh from Nainital during their honeymoon. She commands Rakesh to make love to Amrita when she reaches their hideout in the forest. She forces them to have sex and sets the place on fire in a state of hysteria.

The final disintegration of Minx's personality is caused by violent increase in her anxiety levels as Rakesh (a male) seems a perpetual source of threat to her. The threat perception is so overwhelming that she feels the presence of Rakesh in Amrita's body. She no longer finds her sexually attractive. On the contrary, the irresistible Amrita appears repulsive to her. In fact, need of love and belongingness is preceded by safety needs which must be fulfilled before an individual aspires to be loved and cared. Amrita is the safest medium for Minx's strivings to cope with the anxiety resulting from her isolated and abnormal childhood. She also considers Amrita as the safest source to fulfill her need to be loved and liked by her immediate environment. But when she feels insecure and threatened by the new developments in her environment, 'love and belongingness' needs take a back seat and Amrita appears no more sexy and loveable to her.

In fact, it is not the individual person called Rakesh who threatens her, it is the presence of a powerful male figure who symbolizes her super-cop father who raped her repeatedly, brainwashed her and rendered her helpless. At this point she comes to feel that she can no longer sustain her revengeful tactics against the world. Minx dies with all her anxiety and insecurity in her heart, securing a crisp and brief obituary in newspaper. – “Iyenger (Meenakshi) passed away on 7th August in Bombay under tragic circumstances. No condolences please.” (208)

In *Strange Obsessions* Shobha De has focused more on the psychopathological aspect of Minx's personality which has prevented the balanced development of her character. Her clever manipulation of her surroundings and her ruthless behaviour assume criminal dimensions. Satisfying her physiological needs of hunger, thirst and sex (though 'abnormal' from society's point of view), she moves on to fulfill her safety needs. She successfully secures a state of safety and stability through her father's top position

and her own dominant behaviour. She intimidates all those who come into her way to secure smooth live-in relation with Amrita. She does it as an attempt to fulfill her need of belongingness and love but this need along with safety need takes on a neurotic character because of her abnormal childhood. Although, she struggles against her adverse circumstances trying to fulfill her needs and grow her personality according to hierarchy of needs, she fails to achieve self-actualization. She tries her best (though abnormally) to overcome her insecurity but the intensity of her anxiety is so great that her balance collapses under it, which leads to the complete disorientation of her personality.

III. References

1. De Shobha. *Strange Obsessions*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992.
2. James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1988.
3. Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminism: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997.
4. Clifford T. Morgan, Richard A. King, John R. Weisz, and John Schopler, *Introduction to Psychology*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1996.
5. Fromm E. *The Sane Society*. New York: Rinehart, 1955.
6. Giddens A. *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991



Bio-note:

Dr. Naresh K. Vats is an Assistant Professor in University School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Guru Gobind Singh University, Sector 16-C, Dwarka, New Delhi-110075. His areas of interest are communication, psychology, literature, films, and culture.