Chapter II

A Starry Journey

(*Starry Nights*)

Shobha De’s novel *Starry Nights* is a novel which depicts different faces of women. Nisha Trivedi in her article, “Search for Identity in *Starry Nights*” describes: “The writers of the post-independence fiction have focused on contemporary problems. They have explored the vital areas of individual consciousness and have projected the fascinating images of cultural change, rather than transformation” (*The Fiction of Shobha De*, 180). De in this novel suggests that the only way a woman like Aasha Rani can reach the ladder of success is ‘Sex’. Geeta Barua in her article, “Rise and fall of a star: A study of *Starry Nights*” comments: “The novel is also a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, glamour, crimes, lies, and deceits and sexual exploitation. Since Shobha De the novelist has been long associated with the Bombay film world as a journalist she knows it first hand and has been able to portray it well” (*The Fiction of Shobha De*, 174). Though sex and glamour may be the means to seek success, it is admitted that many women strive hard in order to strengthen themselves as an artist. Unfortunately, the new woman is ready to sacrifice her ‘physical self’ in order to climb the ladder of success in the form of money and fame. But many women fail in their hasty attempts in this direction so that they end up as prostitutes in the red light area. When this novel has attempted to explore the hardcore reality lurking in the corporate
high society, De has faced protest from the men who are unable to accept the truth. In her article, “Aesthetics and Morality: Emergence of the New woman” L. Sonia Ningthoujam depicts the response of the public to Shobha De’s work and observes:

Controversy came in torrents when De’s second novel *Starry Nights* hit the bookstands in 1991. Many of the male members of Mumbai’s high society felt outraged. The novel, set in the city’s film industry, is packed with unsavoury characters based on real life tycoons and film producers. Reviewers, mostly male, trashed the book as low blow, but the public by and large loved it. (*Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De*, 48)

Shobha De’s second novel, *Starry Nights* seems to be built on the popular rumour of a passionate love affair between Amitabh Bachchan, a Bollywood superstar and South Indian dusky beauty, Rekha. Critics hold the view that it replicates the story of Akshay kumar and Aasha Rani who are hero and heroines in the novel. Bollywood is a sort of fantasy world for most Indians. Rachel Dwyer in an article, “*Starry Nights*: The Novels of Shobha De” observes:

Some of De’s narratives draw on specific narratives from film magazines. For example, Aasha Rani’s story weaves together strands of narrative from the lives of a number of top stars, such as Rekha (a father
who holds a high position in the Madras industry, and who disowns her mother), Zeenat Aman (the hotel brawl), and Parveen Babi (the disappearance), while Akshay shares a number of features with Amitabh Bachchan, the greatest superstar of all time. However, De includes details about the underbelly of the film world which are never included in these magazines – the underworld financiers, the casting-couch, lesbian film journalists, gay heroes, etc. (126)

Amitabh Bachchan came from a highly cultured, intellectual middle class background. When he tried to get a chance in movies, he was neglected at the beginning as he was as a hunky punky and lean personality. After getting chances, he became a big star and changed his social milieu. He was married to Jaya Bhaduri, another heroine in the Bollywood while the affair between Amitabh and Rekha was on. His brother, Ajitabh Bachchan used to look after his career issues related to filmdom.

Rekha was born to the popular Tamil actor, Gemini Ganesh and Pusphavali, a Telugu actress. Owing to her background, she got a chance in movies in 1970’s. Though she had a dusky complexion, it did not prevent her from becoming a popular heroine. Her slim looks got her many admirers in the Bollywood such as Amitabh Bachchan, Jeetendra, Kiran kumar and Vinod Mehra. She hooked the film industry for twenty years as heroine. Her relations with many men did not make lose her image because of her seductive looks.
Rekha has resemblances with Aasha Rani as both of their mothers found themselves in a situation of bigamy.

After the success of his movies *Deewar* and *Zanjeer*, Amitabh found Rekha, a new woman for a new self. Rekha’s adulation boosted Amitabh’s ego. He did not marry Rekha though his heart was with her. In the late 1970’s and 1980’, Bollywood buzzed with the love story of Amitabh and Rekha. Though Rekha refused to acknowledge the affair in public, she could not prevent herself from the chemistry between them which overflowed on the celluloid whenever they romanced each other in the movie scenes of passion and love. It led many people to suspect that there was a real life romance happening. Gossip tabloids thrived on the affair. There was an aura, a shroud of mystery around them but the two stopped working with each other after their hit movie, *Silsila* (1981). He met with an accident while shooting one of his movies, *Coolie* (1983). He was kept in ICU for a while. His fans sang peens in his name. It is said that Rekha also performed ‘puja’ in temples for the sake of his health.

As Rekha failed to persuade Amitabh to marry her, she was little bit disturbed and lost equilibrium in her life. As a result, she started making love with another Bollywood hero, Vinod Mehra. But her marriage with Vinod Mehra ended in a divorce. Later she got married to a businessman, Mukesh Aggarwal which also resulted in divorce, with Mukesh killing himself shortly thereafter. These instances show how Rekha’s self is split within herself. Many
industrial relations are lured by the film world. Every hero and heroine is involved in a kind of extramarital relation which is quite common in elite circles today. They never take the break-ups in their relationships very seriously like the middleclass people. These sorts of relations startle the public when they are published in pulp magazines now and then.

In totality, Shobha De has derived substance from Bollywood reality. She closely observed the happenings as a freelance journalist in Mumbai. At the beginning, when it was published in 1991, it was rejected and neglected and labelled as ‘pulp fiction’ and ‘street fiction.’ A little later some critics began to view this novel as a cultural study. Many of illustrations and incidents in the novel are parallel to the love affair of Amitabh and Rekha, which is still a hot discussion.

The novel begins with the preview of a movie, ‘Tera Mera Pyar Aisa’ for which Kishenbhai, the underworld financier and Gopalji attended among so many others in the film world. Seven years ago, Gopal is a servile unit hand in Kishenbhai’s production company who supplies various things of pleasure for the director and the hero. Kishenbhai recalls the day he has sacked him. Aasha Rani, the heroine does not bother to show up for the preview. She now has a small theatre attached to her Bandra bungalow. When Kishenbhai discovers Aasha Rani, she is an outward, ungainly, overweight darkish girl from Madras. He has now a low opinion of her. Aasha Rani is very choosy about the opening
shot that makes her learn all the tricks. At that moment, they are picturizing honeymoon scene in a star hotel.

It is observed that most of the heroines’ career in the Indian film industry is dictated by their mothers. Aasha Rani has much love towards her mother, Geetha Devi. But her dress designer hates her mother very much as everything about Aasha has been decided by her mother. The opening scene ends with a tight close-up of Aasha Rani’s face. When the movie begins, she reminds herself that Amar, the young hero has been the first man in her life. On the first day of their meeting, she tells him: “Do you know you are the first naked man I am seeing, besides my cousin, but he was only a boy?” (6). Kishenbhai props her up on a pillow saying that she is beautiful. L.Sonia Ningthoujam in her article, “Traditional woman versus modern women: A study of Shobha De’s Novels” explores the glamour world saying:

It is not only Aasha Rani but a good number of other heroines who have made a place for themselves using their body as the main bait to get what they aspire for. Women in the glamour world are, in traditional parlance, characterless with no consideration for traditional morality which, in fact, is called into question. Knowing well this fact, the new generation of ambitious women is ready to make every compromise as long as they can get riches and fame. (Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De, 43)
Most of the aspirants in the glamour world seek the help of some promoters who can encourage them as stars. Kishenbhai meets Aasha and her mother when he has got back from a matinee show of ‘Cleopatra’ with his friend, Venky. Geetha Devi consults Kishenbhai to introduce Aasha as a heroine. When he sees Aasha, he falls in love with her at the first sight and gives them his visiting card. Aasha Rani’s face lights up for the first time in the film when she savagely boots the villain, and then Kishenbhai wonders about Aasha Rani’s thinly-disguised hatred for men. Perhaps, it is something to do with her father who ill-treats her mother all through her life. Kishenbhai’s first film with her gets off a bad start, having an accident on steps. She is reluctant to do that film because she hates the snakes and the hero also. Amma is not convinced either; he softens her with a generous advance for which they agree to his proposal reluctantly at last.

When people are involved in extramarital relations, they start escaping from their wives’ space. Kishenbai makes sure that Aasha Rani’s debut does not go unnoticed. Her movie, ‘Nagin Ki Kasam’, becomes a modest hit. He arranges a grand party to celebrate it. His heart swells with pride at the memory of how Aasha Rani looks that night. He tells her to put on lots of bangles on her wrists and then she teases him. He goes home and steals ten gold bangles of his wife from the bank. He puts them on Aasha Rani’s arms while she smiles into his eyes. When his wife discovers the theft soon, he goes back to Aasha Rani to take bangles from her but amma is furious. Finally, he strikes a deal with them
saying: “As soon as I raise money for the next project, the first thing I will do is to buy ten tolas of gold for Aasha Rani” (12). Reluctantly, amma fetches the bangles for him. It reveals how a man plays many tricks with both the women by exploiting their weakness.

When the stardom touches their feet, some heroines start developing contacts with various kinds of people. Aasha Rani makes some useful contacts at the party with Sheth Amirchand but Kishenbhai is not happy with that. He curses Aasha for making friendship with Shethji as he is possessive about her. Her amma also turns on him like a viper saying that she is free to go with whoever she wants. Besides, Shethji promises her two more films. With that, Kishenbhai does not meet since that day. It is he who has given her such a first class screen name - Aasha Rani. It shows that the career of stars is dictated by Godfathers.

Women expect much attention from their lover boys. If it does not happen, they feel utter desolation. Aasha Rani is angry when Akshay obviously forgets her birthday. She wants to call but she does not dare. She thinks of contacting Linda and asking her to phone him. Akshay may be furious if Aasha Rani discusses their relationship with journalists, and so she sits by the phone expecting his call. She thinks that he may be sitting at home waiting for Malini to return. His brother, Ajay has hint of the rumours about her and Akshay. Aasha feels that people like amma and Ajay want to control their lives. She is desperate so that she cancels all her shooting on Akshay’s birthday. On the eve
of his birthday, she wants to make him happy. She recollects her experience with him in bed in the past. Looking back, she realizes how methodically amma gears up for her first big move. When she is at twelve, her mother wants to save money to get Viji (Aasha Rani Later) to Bombay. Her mother hesitates, when she calls her ‘amma’. It is a name Kishenbhai has given her on the day, when they are on their way to see Nitesh Mehra, the producer cum director, who makes successful films with newcomers. Kishenbhai states that many a budding film career dies prematurely because of interfering mothers when Geetha Devi intrudes in her daughter’s career. At last, she agrees to send her daughter for screen test alone. Here, it is observed how mothers are also exploited when they want to promote their daughter’s career.

The memory of her screen test is indelibly etched in Aasha Rani’s mind. It is also the launch of the most talked-about romance ever to hit the film industry, the scandalous saga of Akshay Arora and Aasha Rani. She leaves it all to amma and Kishenbhai. Funnily enough, she does not feel nervous at all as her amma pushes her in front of a camera at the age of five or six. Aasha Rani often recounts her dramatic encounter with the mega-star, in her subsequent interviews. Her screen test is finally shot at 8.30 that night. The screen test turns into an anti-climax. When Niteshbhai does not call her, Kishenbhai steps in offering to finance the film himself.

Kishenbhai insists on Aasha going to the party saying that they have to meet important people. On seeing her, the financier, Vishnu comments that she
is a dark girl. Then Kishenbhai instructs her to smile at him. Aasha Rani catches sight of an attractive man in white - Akshay, accompanied by a woman. Kishenbhai tells him that the woman is Anushree, a Tamil star when asked by her. The party continues with lots of film-stars turning up and greeting the producer. Kishenbhai advises her to go to the room of the financier for that night to sleep with him, after that experience it has been all the same. Most times, she does not even bother to look at the man’s face or body. In the same article, Nisha Trivedi observes: “The glittering world of cinema is in reality so ruthless, so miserable that it can shatter the moral values and innocence of any human being. But Aasha survives and achieves success” (The Fiction of Shobha De 186). It is the individual consciousness, which encompasses the existing culture so that Trivedi’s opinion of the post-independence writers’ responsibility about the present day problems is admitted. Not so many aspiring young girls in the film world have attained success like Aasha Rani.

Some heroines fall a prey to love affairs when their career graph is at its peak. When Akshay phones her, Aasha Rani giggles coquettishly. As her amma advises her, she goes to Dhiru’s studio to have her best photographs. In an hour’s time, he works his way exposing much more of Aasha Rani. She is almost naked by the time the session is finished. A few months later, she spots a life-size calendar of her for a television company. Then she feels that Dhiru is right. His photographs have the desired effect after her photographs have been published by ‘Showbiz’. When an eager reporter of ‘showbiz’ wants to
interview her, amma is very happy. But Aasha wants to act in a movie before
giving the photographs. The body of a woman is objectified here in order to
find a place in the glittering world. Amma is very angry with her when she
corrects her words. Then she goes to a public phone booth and calls Niteshbhai.
This is the first time she has phoned anybody on her own. Her mother shows
the other way, when Kishenbhai leads her to her first ‘client’. She is nothing
but an unwanted, bastard child for everyone to exploit. Sandhya Rani Dash in
her article, “A Woman more Sinned than Sinning: A Study of *Starry Nights*”
criticizes:

> Shobha De’s writing seems abominable and bizarre to us as she is a
> woman and we are not habituated to listen to woman talking so much
> about sex so freely and frankly. But the novel is not simply a treatise on
> sex; it depicts the modern woman’s search for identity in a male-
> dominated Society. (*The Fiction of Shobha De*, 172)

Though Dash claims that Shobha De describes the woman who jumps
over the traditional walls in order to survive, it is inevitable for a modern
novelist in the globalised world to highlight the deeper layers of reality of
urban society, which is the source of cultural change.

The sensitive relations among celebrities make them feel unhappy when
either of them loses balance. By the time Akshay remembers Aasha Rani’s
birthday, it is much too late. He feels that Aasha Rani will never forgive him
as it has been ten at night. He also tells his secretary to buy a Kanjeevaram Sari and a pair of gold earrings. He knows Aasha Rani will find out that he has spent most of the day with Shabnam. Akshay thinks of the life, they have been forced to lead, when his dad has gone bankrupt and trembles. He grows up as a lonely child with just his older brother or company. His father takes to hanging around various film units as an assistant. There is no stable income as it has been often drunk away. Akshay does not hate his father, he feels sorry for him. It is his older brother, Ajay who hates him very much. Akshay can never understand why his mother abandons them and goes off with Suresh Uncle. His heart is not in studies and this upsets Ajay enormously. Meanwhile, Ajay gets a job as a Junior Salesman. In school, Akshay acts in plays and enjoys the experience but Ajay disapproves of his acting. Once, he decides to go for audition for a T.V. play without informing Ajay where he is asked to try out for a news reader’s job. Ajay agrees to that on one condition- T.V. News reading is to be regarded as nothing more than a hobby. From T.V. News, he moves on to a T.V. Serial playing a dashing detective. Suddenly, everyone talks about Akshay Arora. From there on, Akshay does not worry about money when his brother, Ajay becomes his agent to manage his affairs. With Akshay’s successful debut into Hindi Cinema, Ajay decides to move out and buy a fancy car.

Akshay’s new house is close to the Sun ‘n’ Sand hotel. It is one of the most thrilling moments of his life, because it is glamour and sin, success and
sophistication. Ajay does not really have to worry about Akshay’s career as he has scored thirty hits in ten years. It is Ajay’s wise handling that has got him where he is. Ajay starts at the pile of files on his table - income tax returns, contracts, schedules and scripts. Ajay does not know why the crowds are wild about his brother but the entire film industry knows Akshay to be a man of questionable morals.

At times, star heroes depend upon heroines to consolidate their career. Akshay realizes that he has to act with Aasha in order to have a successful career. Their first film, ‘Souten Ka Badla’ goes on to break box-office records which attracts the financiers. Working together, they spend all their time in each other’s company. Every dhaba, every street-side barber shop, every red Maruti car seems to vibrate with the energy of their love. The only person who is not delighted about the star Jodi’s success is his wife, Mrs. Malini Arora, because Akshay’s lies deepen her suspicion. She is aware that he chooses her to be his wife after much deliberation, as he wants a home maker and a good mother to his children. She is a ghazal singer, when Akshay proposes to her. D. Murali Manohar in his article, “Rejecting the Hegemony’: The 1990s” comments:

What prompts Akshay to want his wife to be a ‘home-maker’ is that children would be affected if both husband and wife have careers. He has seen personally how some women go to the extent of doing anything
for a flourishing career. However, he cannot generalize that every film
girl will flirt as he imagines. (*Indian English Women’s Fiction, 131-132*)

It is true that every film girl will not flirt in the opinion of Akshay. But
the public always doubts about the chastity of woman in the glamour world.
Through the character Akshay, Shobha De wants to say how men attempt to
curb the freedom of women. She feels her husband is more to her than a career
but he is an anarchic womanizer so that he pushes her into ‘social work’.
Malini is associated with half-a-dozen causes, when she is not buying
invaluable trinkets. Akshay does not like her to attend his mahurats because he
is superstitious and believes his film will flop, if she witnesses the premiere
shot. She is serious when she hears a husky voice addressing erotic love poems
to her husband on tape recorder. It convinces Malini that Aasha is someone;
Akshay has physical union on a regular basis. When he gets home from the
studios that night, she asks him about that woman but he lies desperately. It
never occurs to Malini that bearing progeny and enjoying sex are two different
things. Being a wife and being a whore are not all that different to her so that it
needs Aasha Rani to educate her. The confrontation comes a few months after
the night, when Malini questions Akshay about the tape. Feeling insecure and
depressed, she resorts to her favourite jewellery shopping. She comes to a
conclusion that it is better to enlist Rita’s help and support because Rita is the
wife of a powerful businessman. It shows how the extramarital relations of star
heroes at times lead to marital disharmony.
Malini recalls some of the earlier evenings at Rita’s as she has gone through the obligatory ritual of greeting. Rita gives assurance to her saying not to worry about her husband’s flirtations. Rita also tells that it is woman’s duty to bring the husband back on the right path. Malini is surprised to see how warm and friendly Rita is towards Aasha Rani, when they have met. Rita asks why she disturbs the married life of Malini. Aasha tells her that she is not the one who is the cause for breaking up Malini’s marriage. Then Malini speaks up with rage: “Look here, you bloody kutti, we all know your types- stealing our men, wrecking our homes” (49). Aasha replies that Akshay is not a toy in the market place to exchange. In retort, Malini curses Aasha bitterly that she will regret it one day. Rita suggests Malini that all wives have to pretend and no woman should be foolish enough to be honest with her husband, where sex is concerned. Sandhya Rani Dash in her article, “A woman more sinned than sinning: A study of Starry Nights” states: “Shobha De moved far away from depicting characters in the tradition of Indian woman loved. She stepped out of the threshold of family and tradition to portray the harsh realities that await a woman outside the four walls of her house” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 167).

The ‘Showbiz’ magazine publishes an article with the caption, “Discarded Lover Boy Seeks Revenge” under a flattering photograph of Aasha Rani. She is shocked on reading the article and she feels sick. Her big romance with Akshay is disturbed suddenly as amma and Kishenbhai warn her earlier.
One day, amma advises her that she should do those dirty films as so much of money is involved in it. The ‘Showbiz’ snippet utterly upsets Aasha Rani.

It is observed that women in the glamour world are neglected by their boy friends when the age withers. When Aasha Rani reaches for the bottle of ‘Black Dog’, she remembers Akshay’s film mahurat party at the Rooftop Club and then she goes to the hotel. On seeing her, Akshay orders her to get out of the party. He strikes her with his shoes and Malini also joins him. No one remains in the reception hall to rescue her. When she wakes up the next morning, Sheth Amirchand is seen sitting by her bed. This is the first time he comes to her home after Akshay ill-treats her. Amirchand is a shadowy figure and a Member of Parliament. There is a talk that he is a front man for several underworld dons who finances his elections. His wife and children are installed somewhere in Kutch and guarded by his squads of henchmen. He lives in Worli, with Lubna, a Muslim Mistress and the dancing girl for nearly five years. As soon as both of them start off, Kishenbhai helps him cling a few easy deals and get into the film industry. Occasionally, Kishenbhai used to pass on some starlet or the other to Seth. Sarbani Sen in the article, “The De Debate: Cultural Politics and De’s Novels” unveils the truth in the film world saying:

The constant reiteration in it of physical couplings may be in keeping with the public secret of Bollywood’s casting couch but it is the Americanized attitude to the body and the un-Indian amorality signified therein that is noteworthy. What one needs to remember however is that
much of India’s manners and many of her morals flow in from Bollywood. *(The Fiction of Shobha De, 24)*

Shobha De looks into the lives of urban neo-middle class society people, how they have been duplicating American society morals by being attracted towards pub culture.

In order to revive her fame, Aasha Rani starts playing a game with Seth Amirchand. She is most flattered when the summons from Amirchand’s office arrives. Amma is even more excited so that she runs to break the news to Kishenbhai. When he hears what the Shethji wants, Kishenbhai is bitterly upset. He is also certain that Aasha Rani capitalizes on the opportunity. She is asked to wait in a small, air-conditioned room. After fifteen minutes, a person comes to prepare her for Shethji with medical check-up. Then she thinks of her blue film days and smiles ironically at the memory. It must have been around five in the morning when she wakes up wondering where she is. She notices an envelope lying on the settee in which there are thirty thousand rupees. When he persuades, Nitesh admits to get Aasha Rani to play the leading role in his latest movie, ‘Tarazu’. Aasha Rani’s career swings into the fastest track in filmdom with that film. In order to survive in the glamour world, some heroines are ready to sacrifice their self-respect.

Overnight, Aasha Rani’s remuneration rises to eight lacks for a film and offers pour in followed by three swift hits. Amirchand is known to patronize
several charities in which his favourite one is a school for orphans. He is
generous with Aasha Rani by giving so many gifts of which one gift is a
deluxe, air-conditioned make-up van. He arranges the trip to Dubai which is
just the diversion Aasha Rani needs to forget Akshay. The gold king of Dubai,
known simply as ‘Badshah’, is wanted in half-a-dozen countries on charges of
murder and smuggling, receives her in Dubai. His hospitality is lavish, but he
does not sleep with her. When she returns to Bombay a fortnight later, she has
with her enough make-up.

The shady lives of parents have a great impact on children. One day,
Aasha Rani pulls out her old family albums from the back of her cupboard. She
flips through old sepia-coloured photographs of the family in which amma
looks beautiful. But after a few years with appa, amma starts putting on weight.
They are not staying together then, for he already has his own family- the
formidable Girija with her three sons. Amma tells her that her appa is a real
movie-moghul and owns a big studio in Madras. When appa loses interest in
her, he cuts off all money and so they move from bungalow to some ugly little
place in a filthy area. Aasha Rani remembers a succession of dubious ‘mamas’,
turning up at their place and taking amma out on mysterious missions. She
comes back in the late night, looking sleepy. At heart, Aasha Rani pays thanks
to amma for her sacrifice to bring up her two daughters. It is amma who is very
angry at her daughter’s love with Akshay. Chhote Lal Khatri in the article
“Shobha De: Her Critics and her place in Indian Literature in English: Some observations and Questions”, explains:

Shobha De maintains that sex is in the centre. So do her critics. Contrary to their opinions, my finding is that ‘Revenge’ is in the centre of her novels; ‘Sex’ is only the convenient medium in their hands. Aasha and her mother in the past had faced several problems—natural as well as men-made. Now they take revenge against men. *(Indian Novels in English: Sense and sensibility, 139)*

It is not correct to emphasize that Aasha and her mother take revenge against men having sex with many men as a medium. In order to attain survival at first, and later for consolidated existence in the ‘colourful’ world as well as ‘real’ world, they start making friendship with men. Neither sex nor revenge is the main motif of the novel, a woman’s struggle for survival and concern for self-respect is discussed all through the novel.

Children develop much prejudice against their parents when they are neglected. One day, when she arrives at the bungalow in Madras, she notices Sudha rushes down the stairs and hugs her. She is astonished on seeing her sister. Sudha tells her that appa has a stroke so that amma goes to the hospital to see him. She continues that Aasha also must go there. But Aasha hesitates bitterly saying how cruel appa has been with amma and with them all those years. Aasha Rani comes back without meeting appa. Amma is so angry with
her that she chooses not to talk to her unless absolutely necessary. When she gets home from the beauty parlour, she finds Linda, a journalist in her bedroom. On seeing Linda, she recalls the time she has first met her.

Most of the heroines depend upon their mothers for everything in the movie world. Aasha Rani is at shooting for her first multi-starrer. Linda calls from ‘Showbiz’ magazine asking for an interview. Aasha responds that she should ask her mother for which Linda laughs at her. Aasha Rani is terribly impressed by Linda’s casual smartness. Linda declares: “You are so young. So beautiful and so successful. Had I been a man I would have wanted to marry you” (75). Aasha Rani is nervous and looks around for amma. When asked by Aasha, Linda replies that she has been a film journalist for seven years. Aasha Rani is flattered and privileged by Linda’s interest in her. Amma hates Linda on sight but Aasha Rani dismisses the warnings. Linda tells stories about the interviews with Akshay. It is through these stories that Aasha Rani knows more and more about the industry.

The night Aasha Rani and Linda reach Manali, it is bitterly cold. Once outside, Linda suddenly grabs Aasha Rani, hugs her close and kisses her saying: “You are a real iceberg, yaar” (78). There is no resistance left any more for Aasha. Aasha Rani’s entire body is floating and mind is adrift. In his article, Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his article, “Tender, beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in Starry Nights” criticizes lesbianism saying: “Aasha Rani’s lesbian affair may not be central to the novel and she cannot be called a lesbian,
for she does not show much preference for it, yet it does have bearing on her character.” *(The Fiction of Shobha De, 207).* Then Linda says: “I’ve been dying for you all these months. And you are mine at last” (80). Aasha Rani is secretly thrilled when she bags the role of Emma in the ‘desi’ version of ‘Madam Bovary’. Amma writes a furious letter from Madras asking Aasha not to act in that film even though it may win the award. Shethji warns her to be careful with Suhas but Aasha Rani likes the lazy charm of Suhas. He assures her that she would be reborn with that film. When she demands such as for special treatment, he refuses bitterly. What really puzzles her through is his choice of her as his heroine. He might have got Suhaila, his ex-wife, for the role but they recently have a civilized divorce. Aasha Rani is fascinated by Suhaila and her relationship with Suhas. It is noticed that a woman substitutes another woman becoming a victim to man’s exploitation. A few days later, Aasha Rani overhears one of the unit hands telling the cameraman about Suhas’ birthday. Aasha Rani feels that she wants to give a special gift to him with what matters are improved between them. After one hour later, Suhas comes to her room and grabs her. Then she tells him: “No, we’ll do it my way today. I want you to remember this birthday of yours forever” (86). It is Aasha Rani who craves for sexual gratification even in the company of a scrupulous personality like Suhas.

It is noticed that women celebrities are perceived as dolls of carnal pleasures in the hands of some rich people. Aasha Rani’s earthy ‘New look’
publicity stills are printed on the covers of all magazines, that gives her gushing write-ups to go with these sexy pictures. Dressed in her favourite white, Aasha Rani steals the show at the “Bechari Begum” premiere. Perhaps, it is all for Akshay’s benefit. Aasha Rani quickly scans the audience but there is no sign of Akshay. Luckily for Aasha Rani, she meets Abhijit Mehra that night who is the son of a powerful industrialist named Amrish Mehra. His father recognizes his shortcomings. His mother, Bakulben, always spends all her time pilgrimaging to various shrines scattered around India. The night, Aasha Rani meets Abhijit, who is the chief sponsor of the show. On seeing Aasha Rani, he summons one of the organizers and tells him he is interested in meeting her. While garlanding Abhijit at the show, she experiences a secret thrill as her fingers brush past his ears. He holds her hands in his, leans over and kisses her warmly on both cheeks to uproarious applause. He passes a business card to her to call him later. It is a game in the elite circles where the affluent guys seek the company of star heroines to fulfil their bodily pleasures.

In the urban milieu, women become victims to the extramarital relations. It is a fancy Jeweler’s shop in Zaveri Bazar that Aasha Rani runs into Abhijit again when he is accompanied with his fiancé, Nikita. Nikita invites Aasha to come to her wedding along with her favourite hero. When asked by Aasha Rani, he tells he is getting married to Nikita but he is not in love with her as he wants Aasha Rani desperately. When he arrives at Aasha Rani’s house, Abhijit is very much agitated because his father has yelled at him on losing a two crore
contract. They spend that night in bed. For a while, Aasha Rani is sufficiently distracted by all the attention she receives so that her attitude towards her work changes. Here, it is observed how Abhijit plays tricks at the expense of both the women’s emotional imbalance.

The news of Abhijit and Nikita’s marriage is published on the front page of every daily. There are times Aasha Rani wants nothing more desperately. But somewhere along the line, she holds his marriage against him. She tells him: “My life is beginning to resemble the movies I act in. You are like Devdas, and I, Chandramukhi” (97). She also suggests him that he should go back to his wife and make a man of himself but Abhijit does not want to leave. Naresh K. Vats in his article, “Purification: Starry Nights” asserts: “The novel successfully portrays the testosterone-excited world of Bombay high society describing the exploits of people in power and respectable husbands who cheat on their wives and leave them sulking in home helplessly” (Shobha De: A Critical Response, 65). Aasha Rani is not sure whether she really leads her own life. She is not in a mood to act in films in that desperate condition.

Women cannot but escape from love affairs, when their inner self demands for an affectionate companion. Aasha Rani hates Bombay monsoons as it is the one time of the year that she seriously considers leaving the city and fleeing to Madras. At the Bandra intersection, she notices Akshay’s Mercedes right next to her. Spontaneously, in the pouring rain, she opens the car door and jumped out. Before Akshay knows what is happening she gets in beside him.
Immediately, he tells her to get out of the car. In desperation, she bends and touches his feet not to do that to her. Akshay looks into her eyes and something about her expression makes him change his mind. Both of them know that the affair is on once more. She cancels her shootings and spends every moment she can get in the secret quite with Akshay. But Aasha Rani’s producers are not all that sympathetic and she begins receiving angry calls. Fortunately for her, her next two films have been hits. It is just the clue, amma needs to come back and take charge of her daughter’s career and life once again. She is rather glad to see amma, when she has arrived unannounced from Madras. It is quite unfortunate that her mother is only after her money. It is also observed that relations among people are defined in terms of money.

When the personal self is disturbed, women celebrities can be seen alienated from their career in desolation. Amir Chand is not happy with the developments either and so he sends for Aasha Rani after nearly three months. She knows what the meeting is for. Before he can say anything, she falls at his feet asking to forgive her. The Shethji looks at her skeptically saying that all women are just the same, who have ruined their life. She tells him that she is not going to sign any more film either. The news that Aasha Rani is quitting films spread quickly. Linda is the first to phone about it. Amma is not told about the marriage plans. She is furious about Aasha’s plans to quit films.

The fantasy world of heroines is shattered when their dreams do not conform to reality. Akshay is not convinced about the marriage idea at all as
Ajay will kill him. Aasha Rani tells that they will become Muslims as the laws in Islam allow bigamy laws. Akshay refuses to her idea saying that he wants to die a Hindu, when she curses him and collapses on the bed. When amma finally gets the watchman to break open the door, she finds Aasha Rani stretches across the bed as she takes sleeping tablets. Amma phones to Kishenbhai immediately. They want to take her to the hospital secretly. Aasha Rani’s suicide attempt screams the head line in an eveninger. Linda’s byline is prominently displayed. Linda quotes Aasha Rani on topics of her decision to quit, to marry Akshay and to have his baby. It is a blow to Kishanbhai and amma and they stare at the paper in disbelief.

Aasha Rani takes two days to come out of the coma and she asks whether Akshay is all right or not. It is only a fortnight later that Aasha Rani is able to read Linda’s scathing data. Akshay’s role in her suicide attempt is boldly published. The stories travel from the plainly absurd to the truly malicious. Akshay and Aasha Rani are dubbed a modern-day Salim and Anarkali. In her statements to the press, Malini insists the point that it is Aasha Rani, who always throws at her husband. As Akshay refuses all interviews strangely enough, Aasha Rani’s suicide attempt gives a little boost to Akshay’s career. She makes him a hero once more. Amma advises her not to wait for that bastard to change his mind. But the memory of Akshay haunts her day and night. For his part, Akshay leaves decision-making to Ajay who tells him to forget her. In the article, “Purification: Starry Nights”, Naresh K. Vats
explains: “The novelist delineates the psychological journey of Aasha Rani through her experiences; with every experience she emerges more and more sensible” *(Shobha De: A critical Response, 60)*. Rita comes to see what the matter is. Her husband’s money is tied up in a couple of Akshay-productions. Rita tells Malini that Akshay agrees to marry Aasha Rani. Malini takes her time speaking deliberately that she feels sorry for Aasha Rani. Quite unexpectedly, Rita softens and takes her hand saying: “Don’t get excited, yaar. These things happen in a marriage. We’ve all been in the same boat sometime or the other” *(116)*. It is only women who have compassion in understanding the problems of ‘other’ women.

Many men try to exploit the situation of women when they are in frail moods. Aasha Rani’s health picks up gradually but she seems totally uncommunicative. Kishenbhai advises amma to be away with Aasha Rani from all that nonsense but amma does not hear of it. Within ten days, she pushes Aasha Rani back into the studios. Abhijit rushes to Aasha Rani’s home on hearing the news about the suicide but the chowkidar refuses to let him in. Kishenbhai warns amma about the relation between Aasha and Abhijit. Abhijit finally is caught up with Aasha Rani at the Film City studies, where she is playing Sita to Tushar’s Ram. She asks him to meet her in a couple of hours. Abhijit takes Aasha Rani’s mind off Akshay. He insists on her having a drink with him when she gets to his suite.
Human beings take wrong decisions when they are in depression. Aasha Rani elopes with Abhijit to New Zealand. Amrishbhai catches them at Auckland Airport when Abhijit and Aasha Rani land there. Aasha Rani is nervous too, but he does not want to show it. Amrishbhai ignores Aasha Rani but he greets his son affectionately. Abhijit walks into their suite six hours later and tells Aasha Rani in a broken voice: “Dad wants you to stay here as long as you want. He has left instructions that all your bills be settled. He has also left you money for shopping and travelling” (124). She feels intensely sorry for the pathetic, scared man standing in front of her so that she accepts to his proposal. Aasha Rani spends ten days shopping alone in Wellington.

Aasha meets Jamie (Jay) Philips on her sixth day in Wellington. It is a Friday night, Jay tells her his story at a little garden restaurant. He has an old Indian connection in his grand father, an army general. Jay amazes Aasha Rani with his knowledge of films and film-stars. When Jay proposes to her, she is shocked. Later, Jay proves to be a passionate and imaginative husband. Aasha Rani feels relaxation and security with him as Jay yields to most of her whims. Sasha is born on a beautiful spring morning with Jay holding Aasha Rani’s hand. He tells her to go back to India with his small family, but she refuses as she wants to protect Sasha from amma. He reminds of her past lovers but she is not interested in it. When asked by Aasha about his girl friends, he tells that she is the only woman who shares love with him and then her eyes are full of tears. Naturally, women do not want to live with their past romantic encounters.
Sasha at four is an unusually pretty child. Jay persuades his wife, Aasha again and again to go back to India. At last, she agrees to his proposal saying that they will be in India in time for Holi. When Jay and his family land in London, Sasha is exhausted. Within minutes, the news is leaked out; flowers and fruits arrive from the general manager welcoming them to London. Aasha Rani is flattered and nervous.

It is observed that mothers in the glitz world exploit the charm of their daughters by making them expensive commodities. Amma makes Sudha as a star after all. Then a fan of Aasha requests her to come to India, who reveals gossips created by the magazine –‘Showbiz’, that Aasha is dead by committing suicide. While they look for wooden blocks at Mother Care, Aasha Rani thinks that she spots Malini, who is with another Indian woman. When they go back to the hotel, there are two messages for them. One is from the local T.V. Channel and the other from Akshay. Aasha Rani’s hands tremble as she picks up the receiver. It is Akshay, who tells her that he is dying. When Jay tells her that Akshay is suffering from cancer, she wants to meet him the next day. Aasha Rani thinks Akshay is virtually unrecognizable as if he were a ghost. She leans low over Akshay and kisses his forehead. It is very difficult to find an alternative for woman’s love in the world.

The nostalgia of Aasha Rani about her home town rejuvenates her life. Aasha Rani feels herself relaxed as she steps out of Santa Cruz airport in Bombay. Her homecoming coincides with holi and that adds to her delight.
They finally find a cab and as they are at Bandra, the hoardings with Sudha turn up. The sight reminds her train of memories and Aasha Rani attempts to revive her sullen audience with stories of her successful days. But even Aasha Rani has to admit that Bombay looked shabbier.

Aasha Rani hesitates to phone her amma. It is Jay who insists her to meet amma as Sasha ought to know her grandma and other relatives. Aasha Rani does not have to make the first move. When Kishenbhai phones her on amma’s behalf, she is faintly irritated by that. The news of Aasha Rani’s marriage sends shock waves through Bombay. Amma is the worst affected and her voice chokes with rage. The phone has rung then from Linda, who urges amma to grant ‘Show biz’ an exclusive interview. Amma lashes out at her daughter, providing intimate details of her life and listing out all her affairs. The first thing amma does is to place a call to the Shethji. He assures her not to be disappointed in any case as Aasha Rani is dead to them. Then amma decides to put Sudha into the hands of Sheth Amirchand.

It is noticed that women cannot escape from becoming toys of pleasure for men. Sudha is sent to the Shethji’s house with Kishenbhai. It seems unavoidable for Sudha to move into the roles vacated by Aasha Rani. Kishenbhai smoothly moves in to perform the job; he has already handled for Aasha Rani. He tells amma that he can make Sudha a bigger star than her sister. Sudha is initially nervous about stepping into her akka’s shoes. Then amma tells her: “You have everything in your favour-age, looks talent. Make
the most of them. Don’t throw your career away like your stupid sister did” (147).

It is observed how relations fluctuate in the elite circles through the characters of Aasha Rani and her mother. Amma welcomes Aasha Rani warmly. She greets her daughter and son-in-law with a traditional ‘Aarti’ (light) to welcome them home. Aasha Rani stares at her mother’s face if she is the same woman who has been vicious towards her. It is ages since there has been any physical closeness between the two of them. There is the usual fuss over the child, Sasha, who is patted by half-a-dozen people, when she is completely bewildered. Amma tells her that it makes her appa happy to see her and Sasha. But Aasha Rani says that she has to think about it. She also asks whether amma is looking after Sudha’s earnings. Sudha’s affairs are handled by a banker friend of hers. She lives with Amar in a grand bungalow at vile parle. She used to give fixed money for amma. Kishenbhai joins them and tells something about Sudha. He requests Aasha to come back to films, if she wants. But Aasha Rani refuses his proposal as she is happy with her life. She wants to be just a wife and a mother. Jay tells Kishenbhai that she needs rest so they plan to go off for a change. She finally declares that she is very happy in New Zealand.

When a woman is exposed to camera once, it becomes very difficult for them to avoid it. Sasha is very much excited looking at the sea from the plane. The stewardess enquires Aasha Rani and her come back to films. Aasha Rani is
very angry with Kishenbhai for leaking out this news. By the time they get back to Bombay, it is decided that Aasha Rani is back. Jay is the one who pushes her into it. Then amma points out that Jay is an understanding husband and also comments that no Indian husband would allow his wife to act after marriage. In amma’s opinion, Sudha is hard-hearted and vicious. But Aasha Rani has a soft heart, kind and good to people who has done so much for her. Later in the day, amma comes to Aasha Rani’s bedroom carrying a cup of coffee and tells that they should hold a big party to announce her come-back. Ten minutes after that conversation, the phone rings and Aasha Rani picks up the extension. With a slight shock, she recognizes Linda’s voice talking to amma about her come back. Then she tells Kishenbhai not to make any moves on her behalf, as she lets him know his decision in a couple of days. Amma and Kishenbhai stare dumbly at her.

It is observed that relations in the movie world are mysterious. Jay begins to get restless and bored. He inquires Aasha Rani when they are going to Madras to meet her appa. She speaks to Sasha whether she has to meet her grandfather in Madras. Sasha does not know she has a grandpa in Madras. Aasha Rani pats her head and explains that her father is very old and sick then. On the long flight to Madras, Aasha Rani’s thoughts are full of Sudha. While she is flipping through Linda’s magazine, she finds in flattering pictures of herself prominently printed in their much-read gossip column. There is a long interview with Sudha that Linda has written. It is a vicious piece in which
Sudha tells that she is the star and her akka (sister) is nobody. She continues her akka should be happy living a retired life and she is married. After she finishes reading the piece, Aasha Rani wonders what turns Sudha against her.

Generally, human beings undergo reconciliation at the later part of their career. Amma informs appa about Aasha Rani’s visit. He is confined to a Wheel-Chair then, with nurses attending on him night and day and his mind is affected by the multiple strokes. Aasha Rani is scared about the meeting. She almost forgets what her father looks like. Jay’s first reaction to her home city is revealing. But on seeing the crowd at the centre of the town, jay feels surprised. Amma picks out one of her old saris from her trunk and gives it to her saying that her appa likes yellow colour with a vermilion border. When amma tells that she has given some of her jewellery to Sudha, Aasha Rani is angry with her. They drive past the famous Marina Beach and Sasha has commented on the colour of the sea. After some time, Sasha start learning about her Indian roots - her mother’s country, her mother’s religion, her mother’s language and most importantly her mother’s people - starting with her grandfather. Aasha Rani is shocked to see appa as motionless and silent. Appa is very happy on seeing Aasha who hugs his knees. She looks up at his face and there are tears running down his cheeks. Aasha Rani decides to remove appa to her own house in Madras but she finds it is locked up.

In the realm of glitz world, siblings suffer from egotism. Two months later, Aasha Rani receives an unexpected call from Rita inviting her as the chief
guest for ‘Mahurat’ party for a movie. Aasha Rani is alerted at once; when Rita tells that Sudha and Amar are acting in a film as they are the hit pair then. Rita seems slightly stunned that Aasha Rani agrees to her request. The movement she puts the phone down when nervousness has taken over. The studio Ambassador car drives up at the dot of eleven. When Aasha Rani steps inside the studio, it is as if she had never been away. She sighs nostalgically as she has missed it all. She takes a deep breath and looks around for Sudha. Her eyes are still searching when she feels a tap on her shoulder, who is none but Sudha Rani herself. Despite everything between them, Aasha Rani hugs her warmly as she is still her little sister. Sudha confirms herself that her Akka is not angry with her. Although she is not prepared to forgive her, Aasha Rani does not quite blame her either. Aasha Rani watches her with a smile on her lips and acknowledges to herself that Sudha leaves her far behind. Then Sasha cries that she wants to go home. Then Jay says firmly that Sasha is suddenly exposed to a world she never knows existed and she is not able to live there. He feels Sasha must go back with him, as he thinks he can take care of her. Aasha Rani shows gratitude to him for he has saved her life. Jay tells her that she marries Aasha because he finds her sexy and exotic. He also tells if she fails to grab her chance in films then, it will be too late.

Women always crave for moral support from the family. Aasha Rani feels desperately lonely after Jay and Sasha leave her and then Jay transfers a generous amount into her account. Her first priority is to get competent nursing
staff for appa. One day, after she finishes her usual frugal lunch, the nurse speaks that her appa wants to see her. He calls her to come closer and he feels sorry for he has done great harm to Aasha. He tells his past life when he is a busy man running a studio which is gutted in fire. He borrows heavily for that film and the previous two have lost money. He is sure of the movie’s success but it turns out to be a failure. The creditors do not care about his problems. He requests Aasha to see his studio prosper once again and become the pride of the industry. But the glow in his eyes remains as he gazes upon his daughter. The reconciliation of a father about his family is vividly presented here.

Aasha Rani returns to her home town, Bombay after two-and-a-half months’ gap. But she is not alone for appa will return with her. On seeing a producer, Jojo, she is surprised as he is young, smart and well-dressed. As it turns out, Jojo Mehta returns from the University of California after studying film-making and philosophy. He offers her the role of mother-in-law but she refuses it. She asks for some changes for her role to accept his offer. Later, appa suggests her that she should not accept that offer because there is no importance for her character. She looks fondly at her father and is touched by his concern. She tells him if she does not grab the opportunity, she will always regret it. He advises her not to trust her sister, Sudha as she is dangerous. Even though amma accepts to appa’s arrival, she is not overjoyed at having appa around. Hence, Aasha asks amma to go to Madras. Still, the thought of meeting
Amar in the company of Sudha makes her uncomfortable. When Sudha phones, she agrees to have tea with her the following day.

It is quite relevant to quote an adage here i.e., ‘Blood is thicker than water’. When Aasha Rani reaches Sudha’s bungalow, Sudha rushes out to greet Aasha Rani. Aasha Rani never suspects Sudha’s home is grand. She asks Sudha as if she had bought all these things for herself. It is Ranjit Jain, a Delhi designer, who has given a beautiful shape to her house. When asked by Aasha Rani, Sudha smiles: “First I slept with him, then I asked him to do my house, but Ranjit wanted Amar more than he wanted me” (178). She tells Amar about this, he agrees quite willingly and so they get Ranjit at a discount. Sudha proposes that they should become friends. Then, Aasha Rani rejects angrily saying that Sudha steals her lover and her films. The rich do not take these sort of relations seriously. A.G. Khan in his article, “Shobha De: Vatsayani” criticizes:

Women in Shobha De’s books are madly in love with men who are macho. The sissy type of men do not matter to her (the ‘gay’ or the ‘chocolate’ boy like Ameer in Starry Nights). Hence crueler the man, the more is he desired by the woman. Beatings and other cruelties behove them. Jealousy is a recurring theme. Aasha Rani and Sudha Rani want to possess the same man-Ameer. (Indian Women Novelists, 81)
Though women like Aasha Rani and Sudha know pretty well that men are cruel beasts in spoiling their career, they are unable to keep themselves away from them. They continue their affairs in order to satiate their psychological and pathological needs and in reaping a flowering career in the film industry. It is not clever to find fault with them, as they are also normal human beings with basic instincts. Sudha replies it is amma, who forces her to phone him when she is out. Jay suggests that the route to his flight back to New Zealand through Bombay but Amar is at home and so he fails to meet her. Aasha Rani shakes as if Jay also had deceived her. She cannot sleep waiting for the phone to ring.

When Jojo arrives half-an-hour later, Aasha Rani shows her bedroom to Jojo. She tries to talk as they lie in bed as: “Why don’t you adapt the script a little so that she’s not a teenager- I don’t mind doing a negative role provided it’s young” (181). Jojo teases her not to play little tricks with him as the movie is a mistake. Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his article, “Tender, beautiful and Erotic: Lesbianism in Starry Nights”, claims: “Shobha De in Starry Nights has graphically depicted the Bombay film world and how could Bollywood be complete without sex and fleshy pleasures” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 200). It is a mistake to think that Shobha De has concentrated only on sexual desires of Aasha Rani. It is the saga of a young girl, when circumstances compel her, who has confronted with the every sort of situation in order to become a successful star in the Bollywood.
Women are compassionate enough towards the tragedy of men though they become victims to the love game played by men. When Kishenbhai mentions the name of Abhijit, she expresses her idea to meet Abhijit but now he is beyond control. Kishenbhai warns her not to meet him as Amrishbhai will murder her. The call from Jojo comes through three days late, by the time she has slept with Jojo thrice. Then she enquires Jay about the affair between him and Sudha. Jay replies that Sudha is lying. Then she gets news through the phone call that Akshay is dying. She feels her heart thudding when Akshay dies at around the sametime that she stands in front of her main altar, praying fervently for his life. Watching Akshay’s funeral proceedings on the T.V. in her bedroom, she smiles bitterly. Though she is exploited and neglected by him, Aasha cannot withdraw her attachment with him like so many women in the movie world today.

It is evident that the celebrities have to face physical assaults owing to their countless flirtations. It is about a fortnight after Akshay’s death, the door bell rings in the early hours of the morning at about 3 a.m. Three men walk in and start searching the room, with what Aasha Rani is paralyzed with fear. One of them catches her by the hair and drags her off the bed. They tell her that they are sent by Jojo’s wife to kill her. They flick a lighter and toss it at her. It is only after they have left, Aasha Rani rushes appa in his wheel chair as appa is terrified for that. The two of them have run out on the deserted street. When she requests some boys to get them to Sea Rock, they have helped her. She
phones Shethji seeking help, but he advises her to go back to her husband and child. She decides at once that she will first fly to Madras and deposit appa in amma’s care. Then she wishes to plan her trip to her husband’s feet.

Generally, women in the world of glamour cannot balance their ‘personal self’ and ‘public life’. When Aasha Rani reaches Madras, another bad news hits her that amma requires medical attention. Then Lakshmi is the only person who behaves in a supportive and helpful fashion. She wants to sell her Bombay house but the Shethji has given her some money as advance. Aasha Rani has enough time to think about and analyze her marriage. She is honest enough to admit that the time she shares with Jay is far better than any she might have shared with a film-man. She trembles at the memories of all the stages, recalling in particular, her experiences when she is nobody and when she becomes a star. In the article, ‘Realism: Lifelike characters”, L Sonia Ningthoujam affirms Shobha De’s knowledge about the film world who says:

The novel depicts the struggle of a young woman to make it to this colourful world with all its difficulties and shame. The price of Aasha Rani has to pay to become the number one heroine is awe-inspiring. De’s closeness and familiarity with the film world as a journalist might have somewhat facilitated her to portray it in fine detail even though the veracity of the details given may be a matter of her personal observation and opinion. (*Image of the New Woman in the Novels of Shobha De, 87*)
Sometimes, she feels like asking appa why he neglects her mother. He tells that men are cruel and there is no equality between men and women. She is afraid of failure and rejection. Naresh K. Vats in his article, “Purification: Starry Nights” exclaims:

The men populating the Starry Nights have no value for a woman’s individuality, dignity, sensitivity and feelings, though they try to maintain a patronizing stance in order to assert their traditional role of power and authority in their respective capacities. At the most, they are capable of showing generosity and sympathy attitude of pity and condescension. (Shobha De: A critical Response, 77)

Aasha Rani sadly undergoes psychological conflict in maintaining relationships with her kith and kin and with the outside people. It is true that men in power are exploiting women in various ways; but the modern woman never becomes enervated and she tries to assert herself as a successful individual in the patriarchal society. Reluctantly, she books her flight back to New Zealand. Then she calls Kishenbhai and asks him to keep an eye on her house while she is away. She buys many items for Sasha including ‘Pavadai’, bangles, ornaments, etc.

Aasha Rani hates flying alone as her homecoming makes her nervous. It is the stewardess who tells that the gentleman in row four sends her the glass of wine. When she turns around to look at him, he introduces himself as
Gopalakrishnan, an old friend of her father. The stranger does most of the talk asking about her life. She takes wine when he offers her. He continues massaging her while she arches her back. They seem to be afloat in space, flying weightlessly.

The homecoming is more pleasant than Aasha Rani expects. Jay and Sasha look delighted to see her. As she hugs and kisses them, Gopalakrishnan hands her his business card. Aasha Rani is too shocked to respond, she will not remain a bloody Indian. She feels that she might have told the story from the start. Jay arranges a party for her with a few people, where Sasha does not want Aasha Rani to wear a sari for the Party so that she wears jeans. In the meantime, Sasha is very much attached to her nanny, Alice. At the party, she observes the undisguised desire in the eyes of her father-in-law as he leans towards her saying that she is a sexy woman. When she wants to go back to India, she is waiting in the departure lounge with Jay and Sasha. Some men at times lose discretion when they are entralled by the charm of women irrespective of relation.

It is true that ordinary men and women are curious to know about the mysterious life style of celebrities. Aasha Rani stares out of the window as her cab has rolled through the deserted streets of London. She cannot bear going back to Madras with the problems of appa and amma and an empty house in Bombay. She feels defeated and all she wants to do is run and hide. With in the first month in London, she meets a stranger named, Shonali who is like a Thai
dancer and smiles with her eyes. She cannot forget her apathy caused by the
death of Akshay. Then she is with Shonali having tea in a hotel. Shonali waves
to a couple of Arabs, who comes over and says a few soft words in Arabic to
introduce Aasha Rani to them. Later, she casually tells her that they are her
clients. When enquired by Aasha, She tells that she is running a P.R. agency, a
world-wide affair. They represent a lot of VIP’s like socialites, movie-stars,
etc. Aasha Rani does not quite know what to make of the encounter. On the
way to the party, she makes up an incredible story about her, which sounds
more improbable than all the films Aasha Rani has ever acted in. When Lord
Ashley appears, she begins flirting with him in English. Soon, Aasha Rani is
busy with an endless whirl of parties, country-weekends and small jaunts
across the channel. This is the high life in London and Shonali is the reigning
empress on the social circuit. Shonali prefers to handle all the transactions as
Aasha Rani does not object to the arrangement besides she trusts Shonali.

The socialites always grope in the fantasy world that lacks in reality on
par with societal norms. Shonali is an impatient critic and guide as Aasha Rani
plunges into her new life. She respects Shonali’s privacy and expected her to
respect hers. Shonali has a knack for making men talk and reveal more than is
good for them. Aasha Rani does not want to mess with shady characters on her
own, especially after her encounter with the goondas dispatched by Jojo’s wife,
Sudha. Gopalakrsihnan talks to a group of English bankers in a quite corner of
Shonali’s living-room on one of their party evenings. The bankers look at
Aasha Rani and then back at him. He introduces her easily as a friend of their hostess, Shonali. Aasha Rani is stunned by the information and then she has a question on her mind about Gopalakrishnan.

The next morning there is a knock at Aasha Rani’s door when she opens the door, making sure the safety chain is in place. She finds Gopalakrishnan outside, who greets her. He and Bhaskaran follow her there and all of a sudden, Gopalakrishnan pulls out a gun saying that Bhaskaran will be spending the night with her. As she goes towards the telephone table where she has her appointments book, Gopalakrishnan speaks urgently to Bhaskaran in Tamil, what she cannot understand. Aasha Rani is left alone with a complete stranger. She has no scruples about sex but this is an exception. The idea of having to make love to a man who murders people for a living depresses her. She has to divert her mind from the stranger who has lurked in her house. Sheela Rani Khare in her article, “Inner World of a Film Star: Shobha De’s Starry Nights” observes: “Starry Nights laced with sexuality, can be taken as a realistic study of astounding conceivable variety of sex, exploitation, and pseudo-glamour of tinsel world, teeming with perfidies, deceit, treachery, intrigues, crimes, and deep-rooted corruption” (Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions, 148).

One night, Aasha Rani is going to share a table with Shonali and her Parliamentarian. She watches her flat is completely devastated and torn apart, when Aasha Rani looks at the pool of blood on the floor. Shonali tells finally:
“Bhaskaran’s dead. And you had better get out of here fast. Here’s your plane ticket- the flight leaves in two hours. Don’t stop and start trying to pack. You know darling, you’re lucky to be alive” (220).

It is only after Aasha Rani finds herself on the British Airways flight, that she gets the chance to review the events overtaken her life. Her mind turns to Sasha and also she shivers as she has recalled Gopalakrishnan’s warning. She arrives to an empty house in Bombay, when she has got Jay’s call through within the hour. Jay tells her anxiously that they have received a couple of strange calls. Aasha Rani assures him she is safe and that the whole thing is a misunderstanding. Finally, Sasha responds in a tiny voice that she needs Aasha Rani.

Kishenbhai explodes at the moment that Sudha is responsible for everything. It all starts with Sudha borrowing money heavily for a film, which she wants to launch for herself and Amar. It is true that the financial relations disturb the harmony in human beings’ lives. Hence, Sethji attacks her when Sudha and Amar lapse into a deep shock after the incident. Amma initially arrives to stay in the hospital with Sudha. It is Kishenbhai who has done all the running around as Sudha is floated between life and death for over a fortnight. Sudhir Kumar in his article, “Artist as Vamp: A feminist Approach to Starry Nights” emphasizes: “Shobha De’s vamp brand of feminism admits of no redemptive formula for the ‘fallen women’ and no millennium, for the liberated women. Her women characters who endeavor to liberate themselves often meet
with disaster. Before this happens, they send a whole host of taboos devised by patriarchal order cart wheeling” (The Fiction of Shobha De, 196). It is not correct to label Shobha De as a vamp author because she tries hard to delineate the factual sex, which so many women novelists have denied to present it in original form. Her women characters fight against the male macho maintaining individual dignity though at times they have become slaves to womanly desires.

Aasha Rani remains numbly for a long time at the hotel as the news has devastated her. Aasha Rani watches the young couple on the seashore from her hotel room and envies them. Gradually, the scene in front of her eyes is blurred as her mind is occupied itself once more with the problems that have threatened to envelop her. Sandhya Rani Dash in her article, “A Woman more Sinned than Sinning: A Study of Starry Nights” sums up:

Aasha Rani stoically endures a series of shocks one after another—An incomplete childhood with a single parent, poverty, starvation, her mother’s cruel dream to make her a film star, the devilish attitude of the people of the stardom to bruise and batter her feminity, the jealousy and unkindness of her sister Sudha, the collapse of her marital life and separation from her own child—Aasha Rani stoically endures a series of shocks one after another. (The Fiction of Shobha De, 168)
Things are even worse when Aasha Rani gets home on knowing appa’s health has degenerated badly. He has not been much of a father, but in the last couple of years she begins to accept him. But with Sasha in her life, Aasha Rani knows that parenting is not only about survival lessons. It is also about something called love. At home, two wounded veterans are waiting to die. On seeing Aasha Rani, he manages to convey her that there is something he wants her to read. It is a farewell letter in which appa begs her forgiveness and tries to explain some of the circumstances in his life that has hurt her and her mother. Aasha Rani has tears in her eyes after reading her father’s words. It is the last paragraph that stuns her in a way appa outlines his master plan in it. He is bankrupt, the studio is closed, all the moveable assets are sold. But the name and the premises are transferred to Aasha Rani. She has to promise him that she will revive the family banner and re-open the studio, the only legacy he leaves for her. When she consents to his proposal, appa nods and shuts his eyes, having contentment on his face.

The human relations in the elite circles blur because people there live in a world of illusions. Aasha Rani wonders how husbands are supposed to care. Ironically, every film she acts in depicts the husband-wife relationship and speaks of this sacred relationship. She does not see a single happy marriage. Amma talks of her own parents and their wondered love. She is grateful to God for sparing her to lead a marital life having a daughter. In the article, “Feminist Stance in Shobha De’s Novels” N.K. Neb states: “The attitude of modern
women like Aasha Rani may accept the responsibility of her daughter like a traditional Indian mother but they do not have the earlier respect for traditional institutions as such” (Critical Responses to Feminism, 175). Aasha Rani’s decision in reviving the glory of the studio shows the indefinable confidence of a woman though she has been betrayed by her father and her husband, Jay. Like so many stars in the Bollywood, she also wants to see her child, Sasha as a starlet which is a common formula of the contemporary film world that cannot be denied on any reason.

The night Aasha Rani makes up her mind to see Sudha, it has rained in Madras. She gets out of bed and she goes to the telephone, when she wants to speak to Sasha. She has to look after appa and talk to the solicitors. But more than anything, she expects Sudha to touch her and forgive her. Naresh K. Vats in his article, “Purification: Starry Nights” says: “Despite her indulgence in indiscriminate sex and professional opportunism, Aasha Rani has a critical eye for sanctity of relations, which she unconsciously cherishes like a wish” (Shobha De: A critical Response, 63). The moment Sudha has seen Aasha Rani standing next to her, she holds up her hands to hide her face saying: “I have been evil, I have sinned. Heaven knows what made me do it. I have done you so much harm. You don’t have to forgive me” (232). Aasha Rani moves closer and out her arms tenderly around her sister saying that they have to reopen appa’s studio and make films. Then very gently, she leans and kisses Sudha all over her face. Appa is very much delighted when Aasha Rani says: “Our name
will rule the industry and the studio will regain its glory. I promise you that, appa. You will see that I shall do it and prove it to you” (234). N.K. Neb in his article, “Feminist Stance in Shobha De’s Novels” Points out: “In *Starry Nights* Aasha Rani’s exploitation by men in the showbiz and her husband Jay’s deserting her does not curb her desire to live a life of her own. She decides to rebuild the film studio of her father and finds solace in being a dutiful mother” (*Critical Responses to Feminism*, 170).

Though some women are victims to the frenzy situations in the glitz world, they cannot prevent their children from entering the filmdom. In bed that night, in the twilight state between waking and dreaming, Aasha Rani thinks of Sasha, who needs her the most. Aasha Rani suddenly imagines her daughter’s fresh, innocent face gracing movie-hoardings and gossip-magazines as she has the makings of a star in the glamour world. This novel vividly gives a picture of stars’ survival in the film world. Geeta Barua in her article, “Rise and Fall of a Star: A Study of *Starry Nights*” appraises: “The novel ends on no definite note. Aasha Rani imagines and visualizes Sasha’s return to India to become a popular heroine gracing movie hoardings and gossip magazines” (*The Fiction of Shobha De*, 178). Geetha Barua’s perception is right about the novel which has given a clear picture of film world but it has censored concealed secrets of it. Shobha De attempts to unveil the crystals of reality hidden under the fog of glamour world on par with the trends observed in the Mumbai society.
Most women, of course, were peasants, busy making food, making cloth and making clothes from the cloth. They worked in the fields, looked after the children, the geese and grew the vegetables. The animals probably shared the family shelter at night. The family home was dark and smelly. A woman’s position improved if her husband died. She could get control of the money her family had given the husband at the time of marriage, usually about one-third of his total land and wealth. But she might have to marry again: men wanted her land, and it was difficult to look after it without the help of a m