Audacious and elegant

Shefali Shah opens up about her 'sort-of' memoir, *The Audacity of Being*

If we were to describe Shefali Shah's memoir in one word, without much hesitation and contemplation, we would call it elegant. And it is not simple elegance that we are talking about, rather the one that deeply resonates with Shah's personality. It has poise and sophistication, sharpness and honesty, just like Shah, who is known for her terrific screen presence and has delivered some stellar performances over the last three decades.

Shah's *The Audacity of Being* opens like a diary of an ordinary woman who is sharing her everyday struggle with her hair. But it's the ordinary moment that forms the hook and makes the reader stay put and explore more about Shah till the last page. In *The Audacity of Being* she is sharp, witty and her humour turns any situation, any paragraph into a light breeze. While she shares big moments of her life — her marriage, turning points in her career with projects like *Satya*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Waqt*, *The Last Lear*, *Dil Dhadakne Do*, *Delhi Crime* and *Jalsa* — she also shares her deepest reflections in poetry like *As a Woman I Knew*, *Art*, *The Many Faces of Her*, and more.

Perhaps, what inspired our description of *The Audacity of Being* is the chapter *Debacles of an Unfounded Romance*, in which Shah, with utmost elegance, reflects on marriage, the many facets of relationships, and how hard it is to break out of a marriage, and the art of letting it all go.

A tete-a-tete with Shah, who spoke of not following a chronology with *The Audacity of Being*, how things have changed with OTT, and working with the maverick filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh in *The Last Lear*.



Shefai Shah

The two words that caught our attention before we could dig deep into *The Audacity of Being* were 'audacity' in the title and 'sort-of' in the subtitle. Tell us about the choice of these two words.

Well, I call it "a sort-of memoir", because I wasn't convinced that I'm at a point where I should be writing a memoir. I have a lot more to learn, a lot more to live, but my publishers thought differently and they know this business better than I do. And *The Audacity of Being* is one of the multiple titles that we had zeroed in on. I really liked it because, with everything that happens around us and what life throws our way, we have to be audacious to actually continue living and hoping for a better one tomorrow. I mean, if that isn't audacity, I don't know what is. And that's just existing in today's world, which is not easy. You need to be audacious to get through, and with the times you're in. The other title my son had, which I really wanted to put, was 'A Human Form of 100 Emojis'. I really wanted to put that, but that didn't happen.

When you're writing your memoir, I'm sure, like all writers, you must be thinking, where do I start from. And then we see you sitting in a salon sharing your hair woes. What was it that convinced you that you should start with this scene?

Also, did you think in the lines of a director, because it is very cinematic?

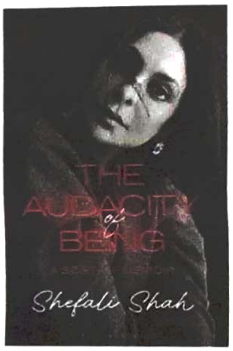
It's written cinematically probably because it's visual, and also my writing has that visual quality. The entire credit goes to my publisher, but I was certain of one thing: I did not want it in a chronology. I didn't want it to sound like a memoir because it is multiple thoughts moving simultaneously. It has poetry, and it has prose, and it's something funny and not funny and sad, and everything put together. So it was the publisher's decision to start the book with *Untamed Women With Wild Hair*. And I think it's a stroke of genius. I believe that if I can't hold a person's attention in the first chapter, then I guess they wouldn't be interested in the book.

What convinced you that this was the right time for your memoir?

I'm not sure if I still think it's the right time. But then I guess I wouldn't have felt it's the right time ever. I don't know when I would have been ready to, you know, say, okay, here I am. I've learned all. There's never going to be a day like that. There's never going to be a day where I feel I've seen it all, I've learned it all, or I have lived my life completely. Let's put it that this could be a new beginning. The next part of my life starts from here. The way I look at a memoir, I see it as a continuous process. I don't see it as the exclamation point of your life. This is all that I did. In fact, I wanted to write fiction, a novella, but my publisher was convinced that it has to be a novel, and we ended up with my memoir. But I wrote it the way I am. I wanted it to be funny. I wanted it to be tongue-in-cheek and crazy. I didn't want it to be serious at all or melancholy or introspective. No, none of that. And I wanted to be as brutally honest as I could be. He was convinced about it. And I'm glad I wrote this book, and I finished it only because of his perseverance. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it.

In the very first chapter, you say that "Growing old is anything but beautiful". And you talk about it more in another chapter, pointing out how growing old is not a good idea even in Bollywood. Can you elaborate on that?

I remember seeing an interview of a very senior and terrific actress from Hollywood and she said the same thing: that there are no parts for us. You know, because she was a certain age, a similar age to me, and I was like, oh it happens there too. Luckily, it is changing, which is great but I agree that in our industry, it's very easy to get typecast. And the line between an actor and a star is very difficult to erase. Somehow, you're more important if you're a star rather than having the ability to act. And I think a big deal of it changed with OTT because all those actors were tremendous and have always been terrific but were probably put into supporting parts, suddenly they were owning and ruling the screen, which is fantastic and absurd to me.



It proves within your trajectory more profoundly. You started with stage and then went on to do so many interesting TV shows, which would sketch out well-written characters for women. Do you think that golden era of cinema or filmmaking is back with OTT?

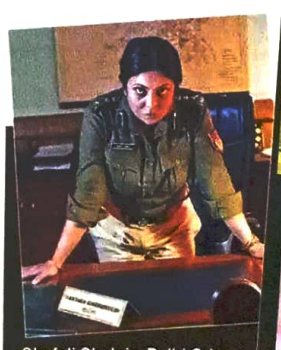
I was lucky to be a part of the golden era of television. There were such amazing stories. There were some terrific shows. They had a beginning, middle and end. They didn't just go on forever without a head or tail. You could make out one show from the other. Like right now, if I go to my mom's house and she's watching something, I wouldn't know which show she's watching because it all looks the same. Everyone's beautiful, everyone's very well-dressed, and they have their hair orchestrated, ironed and make-up in place.... So, the time I did television, I was very lucky to be a part of it. There was *Hasratein*, there was *Tara*, *Banegi Apni Baat*... and they were terrific. Then I don't know what happened. As far as films are concerned, I feel that probably the 80s were great. And then there was this batch where it was just dance, fight, love. Women only had to look pretty and have to be rescued. But then again, luckily, it started to change. And now it's completely different. I'd like to believe we have a lot more to cover because it's only wonderful to grow even more and spread our wings even more. I was at the right place at the right time.

The poems were like little capsules of reflections and among the few that you share, *As a Woman I Know* is my favourite. Will there be an anthology of poetry coming anytime later?

I don't know if every piece of work is good. You know how a book still engages you because it's a story, it's a continuous journey in which you can get invested. But poetry is different. One might connect with you, the other one might fail to do it. So, no, I haven't thought of it. I don't know if I have enough to put it into a book.

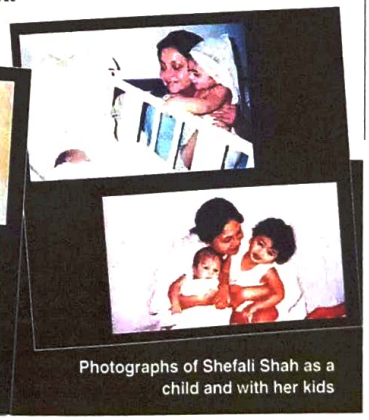
You share your experience with a lot of projects, including *The Last Lear*. How was it working with Rituparno Ghosh?

It's been one of the most fluid and calming sets I have ever been on. And the female energy on that set was so strong. When I say strong, I don't mean Durga strong; I mean, there's strength in vulnerability, that kind of strong. And it was just so calm, peaceful, and everyone spoke on a low volume. It was just flowing like fluid. I don't remember anybody screaming or shouting and I'm so glad I had the opportunity to work with him on that film which won me my National Award. He was into every detail, and if I'm not mistaken, he got the sari and decided how I should wear it and we decided on the rhythmic walk. So, it was beautiful working with him, and I really wish I could have done more work.



Shefali Shah in *Delhi Crime*





Photographs of Shefali Shah as a child and with her kids

Farah Khatoon

Pictures courtesy: Shefali Shah