

Theme of Rebellion in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

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ABSTRACT

Namita Gokhale has written her novels from a gynocritical perspective. Throughout the history of mankind, from its Paleolithic civilization, goddess worship was widely prevalent, and families were matriarchal in their structure. But over time civilization was overtaken by patriarchal dominance, and worship of the male deity became the dominant concept. The concept and position of womanhood have changed in the modern context. An attitudinal shift can be seen in the woman who no longer shies away from taking the initiative. The novel is a splendid work of art, quite different in tone and subject matter from her earlier novels. Its strength lies in its optimism and in its force to open up new and fresh avenues for discussion of women, their emotions and aspirations.

KEYWORDS

Namita Gokhale; Rebellion; Patriarchal; Feminist Perspective.

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. (Grimke 10)

Throughout the history of mankind, from its Paleolithic civilization, goddess worship was widely prevalent, and families were matriarchal in their structure. But over time civilization was overtaken by patriarchal dominance, and worship of the male deity became the dominant concept. With the emergence of the patriarchal system and male dominance, the male ego

acquired control and predominance in all spheres of social activities such as ritualistic performances, politics, religion, ethnic etc., which in turn submitted women to the place of utter subordination, a secondary place; the insignificant.

The concept and position of womanhood have changed in the modern context. An attitudinal shift can be seen in the woman who no longer shies away from taking the initiative. She is not hesitant to have affairs, one-night stands or live-in partnerships. She defies all conventional ideologies of patriarchal society. Though this new change in thought has its

variables, the results are relative depending upon the individuals.

In the Post Independent era, the portrayal of women in Indian novels in English underwent a radical change. The conventional ideal woman who meekly tolerated traditional, domestic and sexual oppression and whose mouth was muzzled, voice arrested and movements fettered by patriarchal norms and control was replaced by the new woman who started resisting traditions, orthodox concepts and values. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Anita Desai provided ground for discussion of women and their problems against the traditional image by delineating women, their psyche and their struggle to liberate and establish themselves as an individual. By following their footsteps many women writers went ahead with conviction, breaking down age-old institutions of marriage, family, human relationships and socio-cultural constructs. Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Gita Mehta, Namita Gokhale, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapoor through their writings have successfully and skillfully captured the Indian ethos.

Namita Gokhale has written her novels from a gynocritical perspective. Registering her arrival on the Indian literary scene with her maiden novel *Paro: Dream of Passion* (1984), she went on to write several novels centred around her female protagonists. In her novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (SPM 2005), Gokhale depicts the struggle of Shakuntala against the patriarchal norms that try to suppress and extinguish her individuality and identity. The novel is a splendid work of art, quite different in tone and subject matter from her earlier novels. Its strength lies in its optimism and in its force to open up new and fresh avenues for discussion of women, their emotions and aspirations.

Shakuntala, the heroine of the novel is a provincial girl living with her widowed

and illiterate mother along with her brother Govinda in a village in the northern mountains. She is a carefree and very spirited girl, eager and restless to see the world. However, Shakuntala's life is dictated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society that are ingrained into the feminine psyche. According to her mother, her life is meant only to be a wife and mother. Shakuntala is denied basic happiness and space, which she yearns for but fails to achieve. She is forced to lead a life that denies her any freedom. She is portrayed as a simple girl cherishing the desire to lead a life that fascinates her. She lives in a family that neglects and ignores her as a human being. The very ground for becoming a successful female is denied to her on the ground of gender discrimination between her and her brother by her mother.

On the slightest mistake of Shakuntala, her mother cries, "You wicked, heartless girl!" and says, "were you born only to trouble and torment me?" (SPM 6). Shakuntala's mother showers all her love upon her son Govinda. For the entire day, things are planned and done only for Govinda properly by the mother. She provides good food and education for her son and also appoints a teacher for his studies. But when Shakuntala asks her mother for her education, she is chided by her mother who says, "the scriptures" are "forbidden to women." (SPM 11). Being a male child Govinda is entitled to better facilities for his career but Shakuntala is denied the same in the name of tradition. The mother is only concerned for her son's future and considers Shakuntala to be a burden on their life.

On several occasions, Shakuntala is dominated by her mother for being a female child. On reaching puberty when Shakuntala's menstruation starts, she is treated scornfully by her mother who is driven by orthodox beliefs and rituals. When her mother sees the blood trickling down the legs of Shakuntala who is in the

kitchen at the time, she cries out, "Have you no modesty, girl!" (*SPM* 31). During menstruation, restrictions are laid upon the movements of women, especially from the view of rituals related to notions of purity and defilement. A woman is considered impure and is not allowed to come out of their seclusion, touch or even show her face to others, or touch cooked food during the period of her menstruation. The idea of purity is forced on women by religious beliefs and values in the various communities in India. Shakuntala is dragged to the low stoop beside the cowshed by her mother. Full of anguish and pain Shakuntala asks herself, "What had I done wrong?" (*SPM* 31).

Bitter experiences of her childhood lead Shakuntala to spend her time in loneliness. She hates everything about her mother. Sometimes she reacts against the discrimination of her mother, "with an anger so violent that it surprised" (*SPM* 27) Shakuntala herself. Shakuntala's 'self' fully develops into a rebel in a system in which everything needs to be opposed and fought against. When the mother compares Govinda as a "reflection of some divinity" (*SPM* 19), Shakuntala dissolves into a jealous rage, plucks all the marigolds in the garden and stomps on them till they are interred in the damp earth. Her rage is symbolic of her rebellion against male-female child discrimination.

Shakuntala feels burdened by the oppressive dominance of her mother who always insisted on her confirming the traditional way of life. Shakuntala decides to free herself from the bondage of her mother. So, she says, "I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation." (*SPM* 18). Commenting on marriage Simone de Beauvoir says:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a Protector – is for her [woman] the most important of undertakings "... She will free herself from the parental home, from her

mother's hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of new master..." (Beauvoir 352)

The institution of marriage is of unrivalled significance in the life of a young person. In the life of an Indian woman, it marks a point of maturity and signifies the flowering of life. But for Shakuntala, it is a way to rebel and releases herself from the clutches of her mother.

Shakuntala's mother settles her marriage with Srijan, chief of fourteen villages and a widower; Shakuntala is his third wife, the earlier wives having died during childbirth. Marriage provides Shakuntala with a rare degree of freedom like swimming in the river, climbing the trees in the forest and resting in the grassy meadows. Though Shakuntala resents the role assigned to a wife in our country who is called upon to stay at home, keep out of the rest of the world and look after the babies, it is the only way of rebellion at hand. She greedily laps up the opportunity as a way to revolt and free herself from the dictates of her mother.

Shakuntala's aspired freedom and joy are however illusory and short-lived. Srijan brings a beautiful handmaiden called Kamalini from one of his foreign journeys. The exotic beauty of Kamalini makes Shakuntala jealous and insecure about her authority and position in Srijan's life and house. She becomes anxious about her future and is apprehensive about her possible replacement by Kamalini. Shakuntala feels betrayed and frustrated by Kamalini's presence in the house and says:

I was not angry with Srijan – he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. But the hurt and betrayal, the prickling of thorns under the sheath of my skin – I had never known or anticipated these feelings, just as I had never expected my husband to return

from his journey to the east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes. (SPM 58)

Besides, Kamalini hardly behaved like a maid. This sets off a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala. Nita Gupta comments, "Unable to handle her unspoken jealousies, she chooses to walk out of the relationship." (Gupta 56-57). Shakuntala decides to leave her husband's house as she feels insecure about her future there.

The arrival of Kamalini and Shakuntala's instinctual and eternal desire "to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds" (SPM 8-9), are two motives that trigger off a transformation of the very course of her life.

When Shakuntala gets pregnant, she is advised to visit the holy temple to pray for safe childbirth. At the temple, Shakuntala meets a Greek mercenary, a foreigner, Nearchus. Shakuntala elopes with Nearchus to live and travel to her heart's content. She throws her "silver anklets" (SPM 115) which are symbolic of her breaking off from the traditional binds of her home and family. The rebel and seeker in her revel in her newfound freedom and independence, and she does not even hesitate to form a sexual relationship with Nearchus. Shakuntala is aware of the fact that Nearchus is a Yavana, a melachha, a foreigner who is considered impure and unclean. His presence is considered to be a polluting influence on the high castes but still, Shakuntala dares

to run away with him. In her rebellion, Shakuntala rebels not only against the patriarchal norms and constraints but also against social and religious codes and dogmas.

Another significant dimension of Shakuntala's personality is her desire to shed all her memories associated with her old identity which was more of an imposed identity than her own. In her endeavour to break away from her earlier life, she tries to carve out and create a new identity by discarding her old name and adopting a new name. She assumes the name of Yaduri, 'the uninhibited', the fallen ones. Through Shakuntala's calculated attempts to acquire a new name and thereby a new identity, the novelist makes it explicit that women need to redefine themselves.

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory is thus a titillating story of a woman who does not want to walk the path of subjugation laid before her by society. She rather chooses to create a new path for herself, of her own choice irrespective of the norms and dictates of tradition and society whereupon she progresses with full confidence and strength. She rebels against the rules and codes of society that curb her individuality and right to live her life fully and freely. She does not allow her dreams and desires to be crushed under the heels of male dominance and undertakes a journey to fulfil and realize her desires and aspirations.

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