

AN ILLUMINATING VOYAGE OF SELF DISCOVERY AND REFLECTION OF NAMITA GOKHALE' S WOMEN

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Abstract

Nowadays, there are many areas of culture which have registered a dramatic growth, are practiced, or at least attempted, by millions of Indian. Many prominent areas have been profoundly affected by the materialistic precepts of West. Western mores are not only penetrating the most insulated aspects of culture, but also creating new patterns of behaviour, supplanting older value-systems. With globalization, more and more areas of our culture are directly influenced either it is music, art, political arena or literature. The culture of music, dance, theatre, cinema, art, and literature--likewise, is now pursuing western way of life more vigorously than ever before. This change can be seen in literature also. The present work aims to show that how change has occurred in writing of Namita Gokhle and how she depicts a realistic picture of the morality and culture of the people of contemporary India.

“The only journey is the one within.”

- by Rainer Maria Rilke

The Manifest World

The very nature of the physical world is predicated upon dichotomy. As there is division of society in two classes such as upper class society and lower class society. In the same way, the most fundamental dichotomy of Human life is the division of Human bodies into two polar opposites, Male and Female. Our spirits are in fact completely genderless, containing all properties of both sexes and both genders, where they hold any of those properties, and are not restricted as are bodies, for we incarnate in both sexes of bodies in various lifetimes. Aside from our body's reproductive differences, there is no difference between men and women; which is to say that we are all androgynous spirits incarnate in Human bodies. Sexual difference in bodies is everything; there is *no* aspect of our lives which is not significantly differentiated by which sex body we inhabit. Let this *not* be understood in any way to imply sexist qualities of good-bad or

better-worse. All souls are equal in spirit, and *should* therefore have equal rights in the physical world. Yet such is sadly, rarely the case in our present manifestation.

Foremost in reproduction is the impetus for survival of one's genes. This is observable in many species including Humans, in the willingness of a parent to sacrifice up to and including the entirety of their own life to ensure the survival of their offspring. This is not a magnanimous gift given to the child from a source of love, but a burden passed on from generation to generation, to carry the lineage of genetic coding in every cell of their bodies.

Creating a child in the first place entails a complex decision process. It is here where we see major differentiation based on sex. Achieving the best possible combination of genetic material for the child is based on choice of mate based on their genetic characteristics. Best possible survival chances for the child, who in early years of development is dependent upon its mother, requires the best possible survival chances for the mother and the best possible choice of father based on his abilities to provide for the survival needs of them all, since the woman becomes relatively incapable of working for survival needs during the later part of pregnancy, and is properly preoccupied with nursing and caring for the baby during its infancy, a job for which her body has been uniquely differentiated, while the man's undifferentiated body remains available for general survival tasks.

The essential sexual difference is that men work for the survival-needs of the family, and women work as sexual consorts and as mothers who provide the emotional-needs of the family, and initially the survival needs of the children.

Omni magazine did a recent study around the world of all human cultures, asking people what was most important to them in choosing a mate. In every culture and race, men wanted beautiful attractive sexy women (who look like they're ready to reproduce), and women wanted wealthy men (capable of supporting the survival of themselves and any children they might bear the man).

The vast majority of cultural differentiation between women and men (their feminine or masculine gender roles) is based on biological mating priorities. For a female, the manifestation of her biological priority to attempt maximum survival of her genetic material dichotomizes into two objectives. One is to attract the most physically fit (dominant) male to mate with her, thereby selecting the most likely to survive genetic material for her offspring. The other is to convince the wealthiest of males (possibly plural) to support her and her offspring. Thus the female biological priorities support polyandry. That which she has to offer to buy these with is her physical attractiveness (sex appeal), and her mothering skills. Her mental and spiritual qualities may enhance both her appeal as a mate and her mothering, but are of lesser importance.

Reflection of society through literature

Literature, the most essential medium through which a writer can easily provide an exact record of human life, society, and its systems helps to explore and examine the people in the present social set-up. The relationship between literature and society is reciprocal. But a female writer, in every part of the world including India, is expected to write only the romantic narrative dealing with the theme of love and romance leading to conventional marriage. She is always pressurized to write something within the traditional and cultural boundaries of her sex without caring her desire to write about any subject that appeals to her. In addition, if they want to know something in depth, it will be usually the story of women's exploitation. Nevertheless, people are not ready to digest a woman's frank views on bold topics that explore the sign of cultural decay. They are more interested in reading about *Mehandi* (it is used to colour the hands in order to show

happiness of marriage at Hindu festivals), *Roli* (colour-combination applied in worshipping God), *Dholak* (it is brought into function in singing the marriage and festival songs). A woman writer's predominance is confined only in the areas of emotional experience. Conservative readers cannot tolerate a woman writer to go against the established socio-cultural barriers of feminine modesty.

Indian English fiction has been enriched by women novelists Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamla Markandaya, Sobha De and Namita Gokhle etc. All these women novelists have developed their individual style of writing. These novelists have explored the reality of women's world very poignantly. There are elements of satire and irony at the state and outdated customs and oppressive tendencies that suffocate women's soul in the society. These novelists analyze in their novels the inner psyche of women, their fundamental problems and their unique experience. Betty Friedan rightly quoted

“It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before. It is frightening when a woman finally realizes that there is no answer to the question 'who am I' except the voice inside herself.”

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory

The present work aims to show that how change has occurred in writing of Namita Gokhle and how she depicts a realistic picture of the morality and culture of the people of contemporary India. She is a gifted writer with extraordinary ability to discuss the sensitive and a real picture of the Indian- style and psyche. Her unique writing style uncovers the sores and wounds of the women which they feel in this man made society. Besides this, her women characters embark upon the issue of identity and highlight the aspect of protest and female emancipation. **“It takes courage...to endure the sharp pains of self discovery rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that would last the rest of our lives”** by Marianne Williamson, A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"

In the novels of Namita Gokhle, women characters improve upon the traditional image of the Indian woman as a weak docile person living at the mercy of her partner. Namita Gokhle's women are daring, educated, unconditional shrewd and self absorbing. These women want sexual pleasure, liberty and individual identity. They aspire for everything that gives them equal footing with their male counterparts. *Paro* and *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* shows the daring women-new women who are not afraid of facing every brick thrown in their way to lead lives on their own terms. They are ready to take up every challenge which lies before them to get what they want.

Namita Gokhle's portrayal of the new woman is quite different and remarkably different in tune with the spirit of the feminist movement. This novelist presents a totally new concept of morality. She strikes the latest trend in their feminist stance- that is, to reject outright the male hegemony.

In her novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Gokhale depicts the struggle of Shakuntala against the patriarchal norms that tries to suppress and quench her individuality and identity. The novel is a splendid work of art in which writer has depicted women's pathetic condition. The novel opens up new and fresh avenues for discussion of women, their personal emotions and aspirations.

Shakuntala, the protagonist 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 ambitious 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 embedded into the feminine psyche. According to her mother her life is meant only to be happy with feminine roles. So she should try to be an ideal girl in all feminine relation such as a faithful wife, an obedient daughter and a loving mother. Shakuntala is denied of 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 human being. She is never cared for her ambitions and for her desire which she has in her heart. 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 (page 6)?" As in male dominated society, a son is given more value than a daughter, Shakuntala's mother showers all her love upon her son Govinda. For the entire day, things are planned and done only for Govinda in a proper manner 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(page 11)". Being a male child Govinda is entitled to better facilities for his career but Shakuntala is denied the same on 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. As in our society, women are felt shame for their gender and sexuality; we find how 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 (page 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, dirty and is not permitted 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 (page 31)?" A girl who should be treated in a polite and lovable tone during such a great change in her life, she is scolded for this moment of menstruation.

A son is always a matter of pride for the parents either he is worth for nothing and a girl who is always dedicated and caring for her parents is a burden for them. When the mother compares Govinda as a "reflection of some divinity" (page 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 the male-female child discrimination.

Shakuntala feels burdened up by the oppressive dominance of her mother who always insisted on her conforming to 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 (page 18)”. She is ready to break all those restrictions which are imposed on her by her parents and society. She finds marriage is the only way which can help her to come out of this neglected situation where she is not getting proper care and affection for her own self. But as it has been said by Simone de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* that in marriage two become one and he is the one. Commenting on marriage, she 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 release 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 to swim in the river, climb the trees in the forest and rest 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, yet 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. She does all her efforts for her emancipation. She prepares herself for marriage so that she can enjoy her life on her own terms but her marriage does not give her autonomy to fulfil her desires according to herself.

Shakuntala’s aspired freedom and joy is 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 of her authority and position in Srijan’s life and house. She becomes anxious of her future and is apprehensive of 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 (page 58). ”

This male dominated society gives all the freedom to males where as a woman is always supposed to restrict herself according to the norms of the society. It is really quite surprising that these all rules which are made by men for women always give pleasure and benefit to men. In the novel, Shakuntala feels,

“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 (page 58). ”

Besides, Kamalini hardly behaved like a maid. This sets off a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala. When she again finds herself in such a pathetic condition where she is not getting respect for her individuality, Shakuntala decides to leave her husband’s house. Arrival of Kamalini and Shakuntala instinctual and eternal desire “to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds” (page 8-9), are two motives that triggers 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 a 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" (page 115) which are symbolic of her breaking off from the traditional binds of her home and family. The rebel and seeker in her revels in the new found 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 that 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 one. Through Shakuntala's calculated attempts to acquire a new name and thereby a new identity, the novelist makes its 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 where upon she progresses with full confidence and strength. She rebels against the rules and codes of society that curbs 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 fulfill and realize her desires and aspirations.

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 so violently that it surprises Shakuntala herself. Shakuntala's 'self' fully develops into a rebel in a system in which everything needs to be opposed and fought against.

Namita Gokhle is totally different from other Indian women writers. Her novels call for a redefining of the traditional set of moral values which are made for women by men. They draw clear feminist image of the emerging new women who is not the man's shadow but his equal partner, a master of her own will and a force to reckon with. In conclusion, Namita Gokhle has been able to project a realistic image of the new women in her novels. Her style is lusciously elegant with images of female sensuality and eroticism adequately converging the colours and vigor of sentiments into a harmonious pattern of aesthetically integrated ideology of contemporary humanity and feminism. **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni rightly remarks "Strong women, when respected, make the whole society stronger. One must be careful with such rapid changes, though, and make an effort to preserve, at the same time, the positive traditions of Indian culture."**

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