

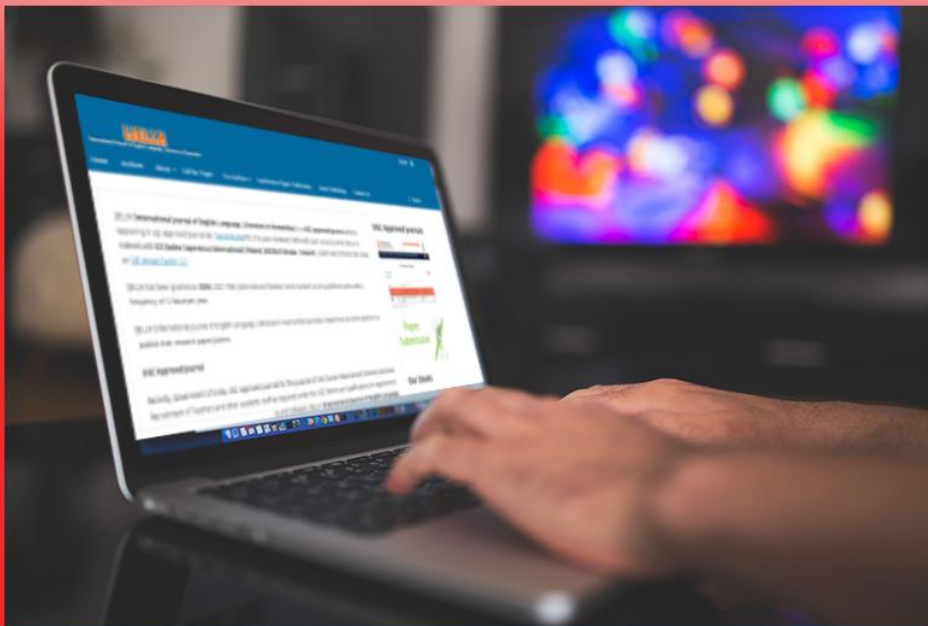
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### Quest for Identity in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

**Abstract:** In Indian social setup a woman is a silent sufferer and is given secondary status both in the family and society. From time immemorial, attempts were made to redefine her identity in relation to man as wife, mother, daughter, sister but tradition trains a woman to think herself as an inferior being. She takes pride in suffering and lives with the idea of subjugation entrusted to her for years inculcation about the necessity to accept the rules assigned to her by patriarchy that runs all through their blood. Namita Gokhale in her novels has depicted the problems and difficulties faced by her female characters and has shown how they tackle these adverse situations. Her novels reveal her keen concern for the welfare of women. In her novels woman are the central characters and the narrative is primarily concerned with what is observed, felt, and experienced. Gokhale's novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, presents the protagonist, Shakuntala as a victim of cultural conditionings prevalent in Indian social set-up and also portrays her varied responses to the society she lives in. The novel reveals the woman's quest for self-identity, an exploration into the female psyche and efforts taken by the protagonist for self-assertion.

Keywords: Quest, Identity, Self-assertion, Woman, Patriarchy

## Introduction

Indian women, the embodiment of love and affection, hope and patience have been showing their worth in each and every discipline of knowledge. Gargi and Ansuia in scriptures, Rani Laxmibai , Rani Durgavati, Rajia Begum, and Noorjahan in history and Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Ruth Praver Jhabvala ,Arundhati Roy and many more in fictions, have left their indelible imprint on the pages of history. The women novelists deal with, apart from many other things, the pathetic plight of forsaken women who are fated to suffer from birth to death. They are aware of the treatment meted out to women by society. They are highly conscious about women's liberation movement. In their novels they have portrayed women and their stories from the view point of the injustice suffered by them. These novels have a feminist approach. Women as central characters are depicted in these novels. They rebel against the existing social set-up. They are no more shown to be a submissive, suffering, and sacrificing lot. Rebellion being not an easy process demands determination will and courage to stand by the cause and face the consequences, come what may. The women characters in the novels of Indian women novelists have often paid the price of their rebellion rather than submitting or suffocating. The awareness of individual needs of women like self-assertion, self-fulfilment and self-identity by the writers have resulted in the novels having themes of alienation, communication gap, identity crisis, broken relationships and quest for freedom.

Namita Gokhale, a renowned Indian novelist, in her novels has presented women as the central figures. She has depicted their likes, dislikes, aspirations, desires, quest for freedom and search for identity. Her characters belong to upper middle-class, middle-class,

metropolitan slums and even ancient traditional class. Women in her novels assert themselves. They have their own priorities. Bodily needs are not neglected. Women characters have the full appetite for life and the capacity to face the world boldly. As Simone de Beauvoir opines that woman is not feminine by birth, but she is made so by importunate process of socio-cultural conditioning, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir: 16).

Gokhale’s novels constitute a broad, encompassing feminist vision which visualizes a rightful place for women in the patriarchal society. She wants women to be self-sufficient for living with self-respect. On account of her keen concern for women, peculiar style of presenting her views and re-creation of the life she experienced, Gokhale has ensured for herself a prominent place among the Indian women novelists in English.

#### Victim of gender discrimination

Indian women take pride in suffering and live with the idea of subjugation entrusted to them for years or in inculcation about the necessity to accept the roles assigned to them by patriarchy that runs all through their blood. As Alladi Uma observes, “Subtle indoctrination atrophies a women’s desire to change her position as an object and to exercise her free will; she compromises her stand, for she is taught the importance and necessity of a stable marriage and family—family as security, as a source of emotional strength”(Uma:4).

In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multifarious roles in the family. As wife and mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. She has to make a series of

adjustments, yet she is not an equal to man. At every stage of her life, she has to be dependent for her status and survival upon a man—her father, her husband, her son. Submissive, domesticated, unprotesting and self-sacrificing woman was an essential adornment of the patriarchal social set-up all over the world. Gokhale in her novels has not only portrayed women who are suffers but also who try to break the set traditional norms.

Shakuntala, the central character and narrator of the novel is a victim of gender discrimination since her childhood although she has a quest for identity, experience and knowledge. She grew up in a mountain country under harsh conditions. Her father died when she was just five years old. He was a vaidya and her mother had learnt a little from him about healing. Shakuntala was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds. She has an elder brother Govinda, who was destined to become the man of dharma. She did not want to become like her mother for she was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds, although her mother cautioned her against it. Shakuntala realized that her mother was more inclined towards her brother. Gender differentiation and subsequent valorisation of male categories had been part of Shakuntala's upbringing. When her brother along with his guru comes to visit their house, her mother is so engrossed in the hospitality that she completely ignores Shakuntala. At that time Shakuntala is bestowed with womanhood and her mother dragged her to the low stoop beside the cowshed and closed the door. It now dawns upon her that she has been abandoned. An anger and helplessness rose within her:

Even if I burst my lungs screaming, she would not hear me, my mother. An anger that had the feel and texture of helplessness rose within me, and I heard a scream emerge from some deep recess in my stomach. The sound fluttered like a torn pennant, defeated already in its purpose. I had been abandoned, I would bleed to death while my brother and his proud guru were plied with jaggery sweets. (31)

Shakuntala was neglected in her childhood, as her mother is all focussed on her son. She yearns to be learned like her brother who becomes a Hindu saint, learning the scriptures. She gathers knowledge by talking and wandering in the mountainous regions of India. Her spirit and mute courage served as an impetus to the challenges confronted by her. Long before her mother died she had forgiven her for her nagging, her unspeakable partiality to her brother, Guresvara. She swallowed the pain and jealousies like a bitter potion, a medicine which strengthens. In spite of that she provided comfort to her brother against the fear of demons.

#### Efforts towards quest for identity

Shakuntala was eager to get married in order to escape from the bondage of her situation, she believed that girls were of no use to merit the caste or varna. Only after marriage she could rise to the gotra of her husband. For her marriage is an escape from the existing conditions in her mother's house where she could not seek freedom, she knew:

There was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, and ideas. It was as if the move from my mother's home to my husband's—the half-a-day journey from one village to another—had suddenly made the impossible possible. A man's equal in bed, why could I not desire what men enjoyed: the freedom to wander, to be elsewhere, to seek, and perhaps find ..... something? (48)

Soon she was wedded to Srijan, a mahasamant, much older than her. Their marriage was soon in trouble when she discovered that she can't conceive. Further Srijan brought from one of his travels, a handmaiden. This betrayal, Shakuntala had not anticipated. During her childhood she used to get angry when her mother favoured her brother over her but this betrayal was the worst, she felt, "I had known rage before, and anger, when, as a child. But

this was worse, a collapse of all that had been good and true in my live. I screamed and sobbed aloud, beating my head against the stone walls of the temple like the kind of woman I had not imagined I would ever become” (58).

Whenever Shakuntala was confronted with problems she would seek isolation by running away from home, ponder over the situation and hide herself from shame. She felt safe and even secure in her despair and loneliness. She was ready to forgive her husband who was a soft and kind man. She was sure that he would send back the handmaiden, whom she blamed for this situation. She found no fault in her husband, “My husband had not hurt or scorned me. He had brought a woman home from his travels to work as my maid and do my command, but she had looked down at me from a great height and viewed me with contempt. It was not his fault” (59).

Shakuntala was hungry for experience and had a quest for knowledge. As a child this desire unfolded itself when she wished she were a kite which could flutter in wind and view all the lands below. There were things which she wanted to see, to know, to do, because her ignorance irked her. Her marriage to Srijan had made possible what seemed impossible. Shakuntala then moved on as a straw in the ocean of her compulsions. Stifled by social custom, hungry for experience, she deserts home and family for the company of a Greek horse merchant, whom she meets by the river Ganga. Together they travel far and wide and surrender to unbridled pleasure, as Shakuntala assumes the identity of Yaduri, the fallen woman. Here again Shakuntala is shown to have broken the convention whereby traditionally an Indian married woman is expected to be loyal and faithful to her husband till her death. But Shakuntala in her quest for identity, experience and knowledge breaks the traditional norms. Here the novelist seems to suggest that if a woman desires, she can choose her own path

For her now, the world was a wild and wondrous place. She experienced gladness in her freedom and traversing the world with the Yavana, Nearchus who had seen and known much. She observed, "I was hungry for knowledge, as a bear for honey. The Yavana did not scorn my curiosity, he did not think it inappropriate of me to ask so many questions" (135). Together they travelled and reach Kashi, the destination that Shakuntala had always ached to arrive at. They had to stay in foreigner's quarters which were located on the other side of the river. Shakuntala adjusted herself to the changed circumstances with ease. Although she arrived in the city of her choice yet she stayed as an outcaste.

But being surrounded by foreigners who talked in strange language, Shakuntala soon felt unsettled and restless. Her mind wandered into past though she tried to resist it. She was now filled with regret when she thought of her husband Srijan. Shakuntala missed the mountains where she actually belonged; even the Ganga appeared to her as slower and without music in those flat and dull plains. Now she thought herself to be different. She was not the one who sat beside Srijan and drank the sacred Soma wine or the one who would listen to the difficult wisdom of the fisherman with whom she conferred when she was agitated. This was another Shakuntala, who knew no reproach as her destruction was inevitable. She was the woman without recourse and was kept away from the holy city like the Yavanas. She realized that the cords that connected her to her body had been snapped. She was filled with remorse. There was a time when Shakuntala would have staked anything to gain experience but now her appetite for experience was no longer strong. She realized that although one might travel for many nights and days, one belongs to the place from where one began. Driven by the urge to go to the real Kashi, Shakuntala leaves Nearchus one fine morning without his knowledge. She convinced herself that she was a strong woman, a mother of unborn child and set out unafraid.

She reached Kashi where, while straying in one of the lanes, she was attacked by the charging bull. Shakuntala was wounded with a torn womb. She was looked after by a Buddhist renunciate who, during the course of treatment, told her to embrace the Buddha but her stubborn spirit would not yield. She could not embrace the Buddha just to please the nun. Seeing death hovering over her, she reminded herself that she could not surrender yet. She had to return home to Srijan. She felt that it was not from him that she had run away but she had set out in search of a part of herself, the part which had eluded her. She thought that dying in the holy city of Kashi was a blessing but she had not willed it so, "I would not depart humiliated from these shores. I would hide, escape, return to the earth and the rocks that knew me, and the parrots, and the patient fisherman who sat by the banks of the Ganga, baiting her fish" (198).

With an unfulfilled desire to return to the mountains, her home, Shakuntala, the eternal outsider, the wife who does not belong, the whore who was ruled by shame eventually sought redemption. She is filled with remorse, and with unfulfilled desire to return home, dies in Kashi, the city of her longing. Her condition can rightly be described in the words of S. B. Tiwari, "Human life is suggested as a journey in quest of self-identity or emancipation from the miseries of life. But influenced by man's modernism, ego and Karma and governed by fate and chance, human life moves in a zig-zag way and at last comes to the same state from which it starts but with man's self-realization of his puny stature and the truths of life in tradition-bound social set-up" (26-27).

### Conclusion

Shakuntala during her childhood is a victim of gender discrimination which is the result of cultural conditioning. After marriage her husband, Srijan, brings a handmaiden, a betrayal which she cannot sustain. Her hunger for knowledge, experience and freedom results

in her elopement with a Greek horse merchant. Here the novelist seems to suggest that betrayal by the person on whom you rely can lead to such actions which at times make you repentant. Breaking the set traditional norms, she seeks sexual pleasure. The question of equality of women with men has also been raised here. It is centred around a woman's vision of freedom. They are suppressed in male dominated society.

A thorough study of Gokhale's novel shows her perceptive portrayal of secret depths of the human psyche. Her novel constitutes a broad, encompassing feminist vision which visualizes a rightful place for women in the patriarchal society. It deals with a psychological study of her female character's inner state. It provides a panoramic view of the development of feminist issues related to women, and embodies a new vision of feminism. She wants women to be self-sufficient for living with self-respect. Women in her novels emerge as individuals challenging their existential survival. She has been successful in catching the whole woman alive in terms of feelings, intellect and emotions.

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