Chapter II

Subverting the Male Hierarchies:
Namita Gokhale
Namita Gokhale occupies a prominent place among the contemporary Indian writers for her bold and daring exposition of women’s dreams, desires and passions. Namita Gokhale’s novels reveal her passion for bringing forth the most natural and humane sentiments of a woman. Her novels are a projection of the very mundane aspects of the feminine psyche. In her own words, “Gender is one of the determining issues in the human drama around us. The new and changed dynamics in the balance of power between the sexes has affected a real change in the ways in which men and women view themselves and each other.”

Gokhale’s novels articulate frank attitude towards sexuality as opposed to the conservative, but hypocritical society. Namita Gokhale expresses her dissatisfaction regarding the issues of marginalization and victimization of women. She maintains, “Women do not write in their unique voice but they essentially write as victims of biology, gender and circumstances from within their bars, as it were.” Namita Gokhale firmly believes that
articulation of women’s problems, their dreams and desires is the first step in the process of empowering them, and communicating these is the next step.

Namita Gokhale’s use of locale too plays an important role in shaping the destinies of her characters. Most of her novels are set in the Kumauon hills. The towering mountains represent patriarchal dominance. They play a very dominant role though they are the, “muta personae.” Gokhale’s books, *A Himalayan Love Story* (2002), *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother* (2001), and *The Book of Shadows* (1999) have strong female characters who deal with love, lust, death, and often the supernatural. Gokhale is a journalist in Delhi whose work focuses on women's issues and literary criticism. Her first book *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, which was published in 1984, is said to have 'pioneered the sexually frank genre' that would later characterise Shobha De's work.

Namita Gokhale can be compared to the highly acclaimed Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai who was a part of the group of progressive writers of the thirties and forties. To quote Susie Tharu: Ismat’s themes are drawn from life in the middle-class household. She knows its intricacies, its drabness, and its bright
spot. She explores the oppressions of family life and the workings of sexuality in the middle-class home, its inhibitions and its unsuspected little freedoms, with a subtlety still unraveled in Urdu fiction. 1

*Paro: Dreams of Passion* created a stir on the Indian social and literary canvass. Gokhale has taken a very bold stance and exposed the hypocrisy of the then existing Delhi’s elite class. It is also a revelation of a woman’s actions and reactions to the actions of men. The title can also be read as “Paro dreams of Passion” because Paro’s life is filled with lust. But this lust has its roots in her utter failure to gain natural love and trust. She has a series of affairs but all are devoid of genuine love and passion. The novel highlights a very sad aspect of human life, which is the loss of youth, beauty and charm, which, in a way, signify power. In *Paro*, Paro may have deliberately transgressed the limits of expression of sexuality; these expressions of transgression, looked at from a moral point of view may appear disagreeable, but this deliberate transgression and use of ‘body’ as metaphor epitomises the double standards of a society that is hemmed in by traditional standards
and has its own validity in a certain context R.S. Pathak suggests that:

The novel, as its subtitle aptly indicates, is about “dreams of passion” or better still, passion of dreams. It is a frank delineation of human beings’ proclivity to those passions, both elemental and transitory, to which human mind and flesh have been heir from time immemorial. 2

*Paro* is a novel about human passions and their aftermath. Human passions owe their inception to certain indictments or accidents in life. Those who are able to sublimate their passions can attain their calm of mind, but most of them come to feel, like Priya the narrator, “tired and nauseated, and disgusted, and defeated.”

The novel is an interesting journey of Paro, the protagonist and Priya, the narrator. Gokhale has deliberately juxtaposed these two characters to underscore the basic desires of women. Paro is essentially the story of an irresistible and passionate, though an outrageous woman. The choice of characters is premeditated so as to make them psychologically more plausible and interesting. Paro on the one hand is a beautiful, sensuous, gorgeous and
promiscuous woman whereas Priya is a simple looking middle class girl but her desires are as powerful as that of Paro. Paro is one of those ‘most sought after women’ who take maximum advantage of their gender. Paro is proud, audacious and self-confident, ambitious woman with a cat like grace. The daughter of a retired Brigadier she, grew in due course into so exotic creature endowed with ravishing sensual looks. The only child of middle-aged parents she became a bother in their well ordered lives.

Priya and Paro are connected with each other by their men. Paro marries B.R., the man Priya loves and later on Suresh, Priya’s husband develops, a fancy for Paro. Though Paro is vivacious and a seductress she is ultimately a loser despite having connections with rich and powerful men. Paro is a woman who has lost her virginity in high school when, like any other girl, she too had possessed the ambition of becoming the Prime Minister of India. Paro tells Priya that she had enjoyed the sexual encounters with her art master. But the affair was exposed and Paro was expelled from school.

She is forced to settle down in an arranged marriage to her person who is not aware of her affair. Paro has a series of affairs
and the men she courts are Bucky Bhandpur, test cricketer and scion of a princely family; Avinendra the Marxist son of a Cabinet Minister whom Paro affectionately calls ‘Lenin’, the fat and sinister Shambhu Nath Mishra, Loukas Leoras, homosexual Greek film director and very nearly with Suresh, Priya’s husband. Despite having a promiscuous course of life Paro does not like being degraded. She creates a scene at Priya’s house when Lenin calls her a ‘whore.’ She slits her wrists but survives and uses this incident to tighten her hold on Lenin. She can be described in the following words: Paro fits into the mould of a pretty woman seized by what Jung calls Animus and that is why she is headstrong and her opinions have the character of solid convictions.

Priya belongs to a middle class family and unfortunately is the breadwinner as her mother is a widow and therefore the onus of making her brother a doctor lies on her shoulders. Unfortunately for Priya, her mother wishes to get Priya married to a deaf and mute person as a result of their inability to pay dowry. Priya shares an intimate relationship with her boss BR who consequently becomes Paro’s husband. Priya is shattered by the alliance and is left with merely the memories of the intimate moments shared by
her and BR. Paro’s persona and Priya’s longings are revealed through Priya’s statements. We understand Paro as an unconventional bride when Priya says:

Her audacity and self-confidence took my breath away. This was not how brides behaved in my world. All brides I have encountered kept their saree pallavs covered and their heads so perilously downcast as to appear anatomically endangered. 6

These lines powerfully criticize the conventions and traditions that have been continually used to exploit women. Namita Gokhale has sharply critiqued the body language and behaviour expected from an Indian bride. These lines also attack the hollowness of wedding rites and rituals. Gokhale boldly discusses the hidden feelings of women through Priya. Priya is genuinely shattered after BR’s marriage but she masturbates in order to gratify herself. Priya always imagines herself to be Paro copulating with BR.

R.S. Pathak states, ‘The Novel reflects esoteric strata of the Indian society. It gains effective strength from the interplay of reality and fantasy.’ 7
These are the hidden dimensions of woman and womanhood that complete a woman but which remain constantly suppressed under the layers of culture, tradition, society, gender, status and age. Priya would fantasize every night and then be disillusioned with the reality of her penurious status coming back to her. Priya decides to hate Paro for her beauty and wealth and resolves to become rich: …and I decided that I hated her.

Priya is always in awe of Paro for her boldness, unconventional disposition, manipulative skills and dexterity with which she handles men. Priya gets married to Suresh an advocate from Delhi and satisfies her hurt self by thinking that she had got her fair share of goodness. Paro and B.R. (Bubu) are unable to sustain their wedlock for more than six months.

Priya continues her relationship with BR even after her marriage. This shows the progression of society and digression of relationships from sanctimony to mere legalities. Namita Gokhale makes an emphatic statement on the needs imposed on women to keep themselves young and attractive as the lusty world and market economy demands it. Paro, therefore, refuses to accept the fact that she is growing old:
This is the Paro who is but recently liberated from marriage and convention; she is still convinced that she is as young and desirable as she was. 9

Paro has an indefatigable penchant for the pleasures and offerings of life. The only fatal flaw she possesses is vanity and a desire for self – dramatization. Life has not tired her – she is undiminished, she has grown.

Paro now is a woman hammered and chiseled by her times and cruelties of life. She has developed armour for preservation of her own self, her passions and desires. She is a carefree woman who neither cares for people who share her life nor the circumstances that she has to face. Paro is a woman who vies for attention and makes sure that she has it:

Women’s liberation isn’t so chic anymore, it has become a little dated, even irrelevant, like Trade – unionism to Socialism, as Lenin would say. Fashionable Women aren’t liberated any more; it’s all monarchs and placards and sweaty types shouting about dowry and bride burning. Paro has done it all; she’s left a husband and a lover, she has a small son of ambiguous parentage. She is a
conversation piece at dinner parties and it is considered daring and chic to know her. 10

These words noticeably are a critique of the society and the hypocrisy of men and women. A character like Paro is considered to be sinister but people like being associated with her. She has a series of affairs and often gets herself victimized because her men fail in fulfilling her desires. Paro is in quest of fulfillment which her relationships had failed her. At one point of time Paro angers us by her behaviour but when we fathom the depth of her emotions her real character is revealed. Her annoyance and radical prying may reveal bestial dimensions of human psyche. Her hard looks, her gestures, her tone and even her idiosyncrasy are constituents of her moves for self-preservation against gender politics:

Her irreverence both frightened and exhilarated me. She could decimate people with a mere sentence, and she used her mocking wit as adeptly as a sharp little scorpion. 11

A companionship outside the precincts of the male dominated culture becomes inevitable for those who are extremely sensitive to the issue of gender bias. Priya and Paro, thus, develop a very good rapport. Paro reveals her entire life to Priya and in turn
also lets Priya know that she was aware of Priya’s feelings for BR. Paro feels flattered by the attention she gets from Priya. Priya states that Paro wielded power, which created fear in the minds of other girls. Priya’s servants call Paro “Asli Memsahib.”

On a certain occasion Priya meets BR in Bombay and on his invitation she meets him at his flat. BR tells Priya that Paro had married her for his money and had used him. BR was hurt by Paro’s indifferent attitude.

He tells Priya,

Men are very insecure creatures. They need lot of love. And they need beautiful women.” He laughed bitterly. Unfortunately beautiful women are seldom designed to provide love. 12

B.R.’s passion for women too has a history. B.R. as a young boy was sent to Oxford to illuminate his father’s social status. But when he returns he becomes the most sought after man who resembles the hero of a romance novel.

Priya and B.R. meet frequently and though Priya enjoys B.R.’s intimate company, she feels guilty of betraying Paro. Priya understands the relationship of Paro and B.R. because B.R. shares many emotions with Priya. She feels that sex was the only mode
for B.R. to communicate with the world. B.R. is the projection of men who crave for sex and can go to any extent to get it. Like Paro, BR too has numerous women in his life. In the course of their adulterous affair, Priya and B.R. are spotted by Paro in a restaurant. Both feel guilty despite the fact that B.R. was divorced and Paro too was enjoying with other men. This shows the impact created by Paro’s personality. The character of Paro is a summation of the tensions between traditional expectations of women and the changing contemporary expectations. He is the ultimate man for his women staff members. Despite looks, wealth and status B.R. is not a happy man. Priya can understand B.R.’s loneliness and unhappiness which had prompted him to run after sex:

Sex had become to him, more than a sport, it was a duty, a vocation, a calling. I sensed that it was with sex alone that he reached out to the world, and it was with sex alone that he reached out to the world, and it was with sex that he shut out thought, emotion and feeling. Women could, perhaps, sense his immense sexual generosity, and came to him for succour and healing. And he allowed himself to be used as lamp-post, or
as a letterbox for women to send messages to their husbands through. I don’t think he ever refused a women; it was as he were bound, by his code of honour, to ravish every female that he encountered. 13

Priya takes up a job in a bookstore in Delhi where she meets B.R. He invites her for coffee and she takes care to visit the beauty parlour for a hair set. Priya admits that she always felt complete in B.R.’s presence. When he enquires about Paro and talks scornfully about her and Lenin, Priya defends Paro and asserts that their marriage had broken as a result of B.R.’s womanizing. At this he tells Priya:

‘Speaking for myself, I don’t really seek or deserve more happiness than I have already got. As for womanizing, I love women; I alwayshavé and I always will. But, he continued, his voice assuming a certain self-righteous timbre, I’ve never paid for a woman in my life. I’ve never been to a whore or a prostitute! And I ’m proud of it!’ 14

B.R. does not hesitate to tell Priya that he loved her and liked her for her honesty, intelligence and for her undemanding
countenance. However, towards the end of the novel, B.R. seems to have reconciled with his destiny.

I have finally come to terms with the impotence of my spirit,” he says. “I am, like Julius Caesar, a little vain about exposing my depleted cranium to its elements. It is … perhaps my only vanity. 15

Namita Gokhale underscores the elements of passion, boredom, vanity and jealousy, which are natural to human beings to show the growth and development of the main characters in their efforts to discover their true self. Paro is a subversive seditious character who could get “quite filmi” whenever she wanted to and obfuscate men with the “magnetism of her moonlike body.” With her “hammy melodrama”, she could emotionally blackmail people and twist “everybody around her little finger.” Given to “a primitive exhibitionism”, she is “a faddist at heart” and lived chiefly for the sake of her “silly short-lived enthusiasms”. Her “eerie flamboyance” invariably helped her convey “the sense of power and presence” in a company. Doing “something so totally mad and daring and unpredictable” would give her pleasure more than anything else. These dimensions do not make Paro a
lovable person, and B.R. is justified when he says that she “is definitely one of the crudest, most castrating, selfish women I have ever encountered.”

Paro is, however, the product of her circumstances. She possesses the most natural and human flaw of not being able to rise to the occasion. She surrenders herself to the situations that are beyond her control. As a child she was kept away from home and she longs for love, which she tries to obtain from her affair with art master at school. But unfortunately she is expelled from school. Even otherwise

Every relationship and encounter seemed to have ended in bitterness, misunderstanding and wrangling. 16

Paro finds herself in a state of utter confusion and unable to differentiate between fact and fiction. As a result she begins to live in fools’ paradise, a world of make-belief and obvious sensual enjoyment. Paro, like any vain sensualist is doomed to suffer from an atrophy of emotions and cynicism. Her body is a reflection of the degeneration of her mind. She looked so like a well fed cat’
and that, “She wore the look of her corpulence like expensive jewellery.” 17

Paro tries to take life in her stride, but is caught unawares. Paro has an irresistible attraction for Priya. They develop a love-hate relationship. Priya tries to emulate Paro so much so that she visits the beauty parlour once a week in order to look modern. Priya feels subdued in the presence of Paro. Priya documents all the events in her life that move around the lives of B.R., Paro and Priya herself. Priya confesses at the very beginning of her novel: I have never forgotten, nor forgiven, a hurt. This book, too, is a vindication. 18

Priya unconsciously uses words and phrases and gestures that were not hers but essentially used by Paro. Priya always wished that she could speak and act like Paro. Priya’s identification with Paro represents a middle class woman’s craving for high class life and luxuries along with the other deeper and subtler affinities. Priya takes recourse to fantasy for attaining the obtainable. Priya is emotionally estranged from her husband. The factors responsible for Priya’s desolation are: the abortion of her child and her husband’s knowledge of her relations with B.R. Priya
and Suresh shared only silences and their relation became sterile and loveless. Priya is frustrated and exhausted of her mindless survival. She says, I felt tired, and nauseated, and disgusted, and defeated. 19

A person needs something to purge off bothering emotions. Priya writes a diary in which she records everything about Paro, B.R., Suresh and herself. She cites her honest feelings for B.R. and about their sexual encounters. She also mentions her frequent and vigorous fanaticizing with B.R. Priya addresses her husband as a clumsy lover in the diary. One day Paro reads the book by chance and gets infuriated. She calls Priya a voyeur. Though Paro herself indulges in various relationships, she hates the idea of Priya being in love with her ex husband B.R. The revelation about Priya’s fantasies shocks Suresh to such an extent that he forces Priya to leave the house. Priya goes to her brother’s house but after a few days she is politely kicked out and asked to live alone. Priya makes an attempt to commit suicide. She goes to the sea shore and walks towards the sea. But, a jellyfish stings her and she goes in search of help to B.R. He makes love to her and then declares that he was engaged to an Australian girl. Priya feels lonely, dejected and

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defeated. She does not have any other solution to her loneliness but that of going back to her husband who had ignored her letters and pleas to allow her back into his life.

Priya lives a life that is worst than death and feels engulfed by insecurity and terror. Priya and those women like her are placed in a pathetic condition and Namita Gokhale brilliantly underscores the unfulfilled needs and longings of such women. The novel also is a detailed comment on the impenetrable strata of the so-called western urban Indian society.

Priya’s comparison of Paro to animals conveys her mental and physical condition. Namita Gokhale’s use of imagery is deliberate and is highly functional. For instance:

She is capable of bursting into a massive horselaugh. ...at the sight of a male her nostrils would get distended like a mare. ...and she will very often respond feverishly, obscenely, like a cat in heat. ...indeed a love sick animal. She grinned gleefully, like a satyr. Paro, after her unsuccessful bid to commit suicide, shriveled up like an apple that has been stored too long. 20
Paro, while displaying the remnants of her sexuality amidst the wreck of her body is described in the following words, “like a flagship in a war-devastated land.” Namita Gokhale’s use of imagery powerfully evokes the necessary atmosphere in the novel. The expressions are a verbal sketch of the characters inscape that helps us understand the satiric undercurrents in the society.

Namita Gokhale’s juxtaposition of both these women presents the two dimensions of a single persona. Both Paro and Priya represent the woman of the eighties who dared to go against the established conventions of matrimony and motherhood. Gokhale also uses B.R. as a powerful character who suffers from the Jungian ‘masculine mother-complex’ and therefore seeks mother in every woman he meets. Priya to B.R. is as real as was his mother hence he is able to treat her with tenderness that would overwhelm Priya with perfect bliss. With the help of inherited collective image of woman in his unconscious B.R. is tempted to win the woman who best corresponds to his own femininity.

*Paro* is a critique of the institution of marriage. In the Indian context marriage is the most significant event in a woman’s life. According to various religions it is a sacrament but with times
the ideal institution got subverted into a convenient contract for
promiscuity and infidelity. Paro as a novel also critiques sex as a
means of fulfillment of a relationship. Paro and Priya are sexually
active and they get equally enthusiastic partners yet the inner
recesses of their minds are vacant. They both yearn for love and
remain unfulfilled. Namita Gokhale has given an account of
women’s mundane and unacknowledged yearnings as well as their
grit and determination to survive against hardship.

Paro as a novel has satirical potential that uses sex as a
message that signals frustration with patriarchal discourse without
seeming victimized. Paro’s and Priya’s indulgence in sex with
different partners suggests a metaphorical reversal of roles in an
attempt to topsyturvy the gendering of the conventional fictions
and inverts the patriarchal value systems. Namita Gokhale also
takes recourse to comedy to highlight gender issues. In Paro, the
idea of the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy world is presented through
the novel form that superficially resembles a novel. The title
conflates the cosmic references to Goddess Parvati, the epitome of
virtue, purity and selfless love.
Paro is nowhere close to Parvati, the Goddess. Married several times, and living in adulterous relationship with a man much younger than her, Paro transgresses all the moral boundaries of the typical ‘Indian Woman’ set down by the society. The erotic and the economic are entwined to draw attention to the gender prescription and marginalization of women. The laughter that the writer has tried to evoke can be analogized with Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and festive laughter, which reflects the freedom from rules and rituals as an important element. Bakhtin saw the carnival not just as spectacle, but also an event where everyone participated outside the hegemony of the church and the feudal culture. In *Paro*, the preoccupation with sexuality represents a carnivalesque upheaval in which the body reigns supreme.

Images of the ‘grotesque body’ and the ‘grotesque bodily processes’ and themes such as copulation, pregnancy, birth, eating drinking and death permeate the text. The carnival spirit that this produces, in itself, does not constitute humour. Humour has to be understood carefully as it is camouflaged by a layer of ironic comments.
There is a festive banquet feel about the novel because of a wedding banquet at the beginning of the novel. There are parties where ‘the popular images of food and drink are active and triumphant.’ Convexities and orifices are the common characteristics of the grotesque during the carnival. The limits between the body and the world are weakened. Food and sex collapse often to add to the festivities of the moment. B.R.’s cutting of a three tiered cake and placing the little bridegroom perched upon the cake into Paro’s waiting mouth symbolically projects her as a man eater. The body links itself to other bodies and to the outside world. Reconstituting women’s sexual needs and liberating them from the ‘goddess status’ is the secret mission of the novel. Priya symbolically, textually and sexually embraces the ethos that she critiques. Namita Gokhale has valourised and satirized the body at the same time.

Arundahti Roy, too, has used the body as metaphor to expose the double standards of a society that is dominated by traditional expectations. The possibility of negotiating life with the top half covered and the bottom half bared becomes the trope for hypocrisy. It satirises the tolerance to ‘men’s needs and overlooks
women’s which ultimately leads to the tragedy in the novel. This novel also projects the bluntness in relationships.

The novel can be looked upon as a romance, a tragedy and satire. Paro and Priya are both adventurous in their relationships. But Priya is confined to her marital bondage because of her milieu whereas Paro is a free bird. She chooses her partners and the duration of a relationship. Neither of them is happy nor do they find satiation and peace in life. Namita Gokhale had underscored the vanity of both the forms of life for a woman. Paro is a strong personality for Priya but Paro, in reality, is a projection of the very subtle and intricate dimensions of the feminine psyche.

Namita Gokhale’s second novel Gods, Graves and Grandmother (1994) can be viewed from various perspectives such as the politics of gender, religion and social hypocrisy. The women in this novel depict different shades of the feminine sensibility. The novel can also be looked upon as a documentation of the vanities, jealousies, loyalties, prejudices and eccentricities present in the feminine. At the same time the novel convincingly talks about the most powerful instinct in woman, which is the “survival instinct.” The story deals with the biological and psychological
growth of the protagonist. The protagonist and the narrator Gudiya renders the events very sharply and in a brutally candid style. The novel brings to our notice the pathetic fact about prostitutes and their children. Gudiya and her mother and grandmother are reduced from riches to rags. She narrates their wealth in terms of their possessions such as a haveli with a hundred and thirty rooms and twenty-two servants. Gudiya speaks of her grandmother and their glorious past with a nostalgic impasse:

My grandmother had been a great singer, a kothewali whose voice more liquid and beautiful than Lata Mangeshkar’s. Eleven nawabs and two Englishmen were besotted with her. Carriages, buggies, Rolls Royce’s and Daimlers used to line up outside the house in the evening. 21

The novel defies the conventional image of woman and simultaneously the patriarchal constructs of gender. Namita Gokhale paints colourful women who challenge the generic (submissive, unresisting, self-sacrificing and domesticated) roles assigned to woman. Women in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* challenge the politics of sex and successfully sever the subject –
object gamut. The women in this novel are the manifestations of the stronger elements of women. Subhash Chandra states:

The compelling question that the novel raises is about the fate of women who find themselves almost destitute and helpless in the cruel or at best callous world. Do they go under and get crushed by the weight of the hostile circumstances or do they stand up and face the crisis like men do? Do they indulge in self pity and grovel in pathetic situations or do they stand up, put their act together and get on with their business of living - 22

The novel questions some very sensitive issues such as premarital conception, widow remarriage and the status of prostitutes. All the women in the novel assume the centre stage in their own way. They are emotionally powerful women. They are self-conscious and confident; they are resourceful, dynamic and even aggressive. The most important and pivotal aspect of the novel is the ability of the women to live in a male dominated world on their terms.

*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* begins with the plight of Gudiya, her mother and grandmother being forced to leave the
Haveli because of a scandal and take shelter under a peepul tree. The novel questions the fate of destitute and helpless women in a world ridden with hypocrisy and selfishness. It is a saga of Ammi and Gudiya who abstains from indulging in self pity and to the contrary put up fight against circumstances. Gudiya appreciates her grandmother’s deftness at the art of survival.

The grandmother of the novel is indeed a grand woman who survives solely because of resourcefulness and positive outlook on life. She sets up a temple under the peepul tree behind their hut. The author informs us that Ammi is a Muslim and was ‘never well versed in the higher tenets of Hinduism’ but she acts as the ‘pujarin’ (devout worshipper) of the temple and collects the proceeds from the offerings made by the devotees. Ammi uses her mellifluous voice for singing bhajans and enthraling the audience who later become committed devotees and generously pour their offerings. Namita Gokhale juxtaposes two exactly opposite professions of prostitution and ‘pujarin’ and uses it to criticize the hypocrisy of the society that would have otherwise ostracized a woman for being a prostitute and prohibited her entry into holy precincts.
The world of *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is dominated by women characters and male characters as supporters in a secondary role. The grandmother (Ammi), Gudiya (the narrator), Gudiya’s insignificant mother, Mrs. Lamba (the Principal of St. Jude’s school for the socially handicapped in which Gudiya studies), the tough spirited and domineering Phoolwati and Lila (the sincere disciple of Ammi). The makeshift temple begins to prosper and soon Ammi has gold coins, which, she very carefully saves for some future need. The four women live on their terms and conditions without getting bogged down by any social agents or forces. The women in the novel confirm to the postulates of the ‘New Woman.’

Ammi is indeed a powerful woman because she has an indefatigable survival instinct. Her daughter who is supposed to support her and Gudiya elopes with the beggar, Riyazuddin Rizwi. This incident does not deter Ammi in any way. Instead, she steals a marble slab from a nearby construction site and purloins five rounded stones from the, “Saheb’s rockery”, to set up a makeshift temple for their survival. These actions of Ammi are suggestive of her grit and gumption the crucial quality for survival. Ammi
does not bow to Sundar Pahalwan’s demands for ‘hafta’ or the money paid to goons of a locality by its residents for gratuitous protection of business and property. Ammi’s character can be summed up in Gudiya’s words; She was not the one to shed tears and she never wasted her time on anger. 23

Ammi possesses some strange inner strength that assures her safe sailing in troubled waters. Ammi conquers insurmountable spiritual heights and thus becomes a model for women indulging in self pity to use their wit and will for survival. Through the different shades of Ammi’s character, Namita Gokhale demonstrates the female potential, both for the corporeal and the spiritual world, which is considered to be the domain of the ‘male.’ Ammi’s character also suggests that women can survive sans pity, sympathy and support of their male counter parts.

Phoolwati is another character that represents strength and will power and is a true representative the ‘New Woman’. She is the wife of the tea-stall owner Shambhu. Phoolwati kicks Shambhu when he returns home drunk and tries to beat her. This act marks the reversal of the patriarchal norm of wife beating. Phoolwati does not wail and bemoan the murder of Shambu, but displays
immense courage and entrepreneurial qualities by taking stalk of the situation. Phoolwati does not hesitate to blame Shambhu for her barrenness. On Lila’s taunting her as a barren widow and not allowing her to plant fruit trees she expresses her fury by telling Lila that it was Shambhu’s absence from District Madhubani that was to be blamed for barrenness and her not bearing a child was also the proof of her ‘shining virtue.’ Phoolwati openly calls Shambhu a philanderer and a man who had abandoned his conjugal duties thereby leaving his wife to be stigmatized as a ‘barren widow.’

Phoolwati’s attitude toward Sundar Pahalwan is that of non-co-operation. But in the due course Sundar Pahalwan becomes an ardent admirer of Phoolwati. She has a very strong relationship with Ammi and assures a say in the matters of temple. She seizes opportunities for the benefit of the temple and also creates many which establish her as a practical and farsighted woman. Phoolwati’s farsightedness and practical perspectives on life enable her to survive, prosper, and carve a niche in the new surroundings into which she is thrown after Shambhu’s sudden death.
Phoolwati handles Sundar Pahalwan very adroitly. He seems to lose his aggressiveness and belligerence in Phoolwati’s presence. He eventually gets attracted to Phoolwati and gets married. The marriage between Sundar Pahalwan and Phoolwati is again an event that subverts the convention of male domination. Phoolwati’s impulsive behaviour keeps Sundar in control. When Sundar Pahalwan proposes marriage to Phoolwati, she lays certain conditions before conveying her acceptance. The conditions she asks Sundar to fulfill are: (1) Sundar would build a good house for her and she would be its irrevocable owner. (2) She would continue running her business. (3) Gudiya would be their adoptive daughter. Sundar Pahalwan’s acceptance of Phoolwati’s does drive home a very crucial point. It makes a woman reader conscious of her right to ownership of property. In the Male dominated Indian society property rights are vested only with men. He does not mind her extravagance and showers lots of affection on her. Namita Gokhale hints very loudly and clearly at the most important aspect of a woman’s life, which could be the turning point of her life. She stresses that women have the ability to put an end to marital victimization and oppression. A woman has to assert her self-
respect, needs and desires for a balanced (physical and mental) survival. Nothing in this world can, therefore, dominate Phoolwati; she is undaunted by sex, class or even her widowed state.

Phoolwati’s presence of mind is admirable. She does not hesitate to tell Pandit Kailash Shastry, a well-known religious scholar who studies her palm to forecast her future:

> Arre, Panditji,” Phoolwati replied irritably, “even if you tell me my past accurately, that is no guarantee that you know anything about my future. Every chaiwallah in a radius of five miles knows my past – don’t bother about what’s gone. What’s to come is what matters and no dakshina or money for prayer’s until your predictions come true. Nobody can make a fool of Phoolwati!

Phoolwati represents all the qualities that are essential for survival. Women do get duped by fortunetellers but she refuses to pay the Pandit until his predictions about her came true. Phoolwati shares a very special relationship with Gudiya and she genuinely cares for her. Gudiya acknowledges Phoolwati’s cares and appreciates the way she has cared to dress her up for school.
Phoolwati’s reaction to the death of both the men in her life is quite unlike the behaviour displayed by the ‘conventional women.’ Various hues of Phoolwati’s character, in fact, show Namita Gokhale’s formulation of a bold, fearless, practical, daring and assertive New Woman.

Phoolwati’s character matures in the true sense towards the end of the novel. Her calm reaction to Sundar’s death comes as a shock. She neither screams nor cries loudly but calmly drags Sundar’s body inside the house. She ‘systematically breaks her green bangles on the cold marble floor.’ 26 She returns to her normal self immediately after Sundar’s death. Phoolwati’s character brings out the independent spirit, which supersedes interdependent spirit.

Gudiya is the protagonist of the novel, she grows with the novel. Gudiya faces many problems since childhood. She is thrown into a state of penury after having lived in a castle like haveli. She mentions that she does not know who her father must have been and tries to relate her complexion and features to some Afghan or Englishman. The facts narrated by Gudiya reflect the level of maturity of a small innocent girl who is a victim of the
circumstances. She talks of her mother’s affair with the harmonium player and later her defeat in the lawsuit against the harmonium player’s wife. She very sadly narrates her mother’s condition after the scandal. While speaking about her mother we can easily feel an agonising sense of pity Gudiya painfully experiences:

Then there was a court case. I believe it created a sensation when ‘His’ wife attacked my mother in the corridor outside the courtroom. The two women wrestled and grappled on the floor. There was no one to cheer my mother on. That woman tore through my mother’s burka, then seized her blonde locks and threw the wig out of the window. My mother took the witness box without her hair, her fair glistening skull more embarrassingly naked and sordid than the sad accusations against her. We lost the case and everything we had. 25

This can be looked upon as a critique of the society that forgives men and punishes women. Gudiya suggests that her mother did not deserve such a humiliating treatment. Men visit prostitutes and fulfill their desires, they promise them love and security but ultimately the fear of the society makes them ditch the
prostitutes. The harmonium player decamps with Gudiya’s mother’s jewellery and other luggage and mercilessly abandons her.

*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is a story that provokes thinking on issues of prostitution and the hypocrisy of men. Gudiya’s character has to be viewed in the terms of her relationship with different men and women in the text. Gudiya too, is a strong character. She has witnessed various important incidents and learnt from her observations. Her relationship with Kalki marks a radical departure from the stereotypical man-woman relationship. The position of a woman who is sought and besought has been topsyturvyfied. It is Gudiya who gets attracted to Kalki and falls in love with him. The deliberate inversion of subject-object concept emphasizes on a woman’s assuming the position of the subject thus infringing upon the male domain.

Gudiya mentions that she does not like her name. She confesses:

> I was constantly trying out unusual and exotic names which I thought were better suited to my new personality I was only waiting, chrysalis-like, to assume. Samina was a particular favourite, or else Shabnam
Gudiya, the thirteen year old wishes to acquire a new identity. Namita Gokhale explicitly discusses women’s need to redefine themselves and their identity. Gudiya feels that her name demeans her personality. She strongly feels that her name, which meant ‘doll’, is not apt, as she had not possessed a single doll since childhood. She desires to have a royal sounding name that would fetch her attention and importance in the society. She decides to name herself Pooja Abhimanyu Singh. Gudiya displays immense courage in giving away name and selecting one of her choice, thereby selecting her own identity.

The period of Gudiya’s attaining puberty is another important milestone in the life of every girl and for Gudiya it is something mysterious. She is ignorant about that aspect growing up. She says, ‘Thirteen is a confusing age for a girl; there is turmoil and agitation in the body and the mind and even the environment.’ Her grandmother reacts very rudely and addresses her as a burden from that moment. Phoolwati explains Gudiya that it was a period when a girl became a woman but it was also a time
when she was impure. She mentions that she was exiled in a room and so she curses womanhood that had ‘improvidently descended’ upon her. A girl should become a burden on attaining puberty is the most sad and touching reality of a girl attaining womanhood. It makes us aware of the dangers that a girl is exposed to once she becomes a woman even when she still is ignorant and innocent.

Phoolwati and Gudiya indeed share a special bond but Gudiya does not like being addressed as Phoolwati’s daughter. Phoolwati assures Gudiya that her child would be born and brought up in a style of Gudiya’s ‘background.’

Gudiya falls in love with Kalki, a handsome youth, who is a part of a musical band. Gudiya considers Kalki as her dream boy. Kalki is a good-looking young man who later becomes the husband of Gudiya and yet remains as an insignificant character in the text. Kalki is compelled to marry Gudiya by Phoolwati and Sundar Pahalwan. Kalki and Gudiya have sex before getting married and this is noticed by Phoolwati. She does not want ‘his worm to creep in her belly’ which would make things difficult for Gudiya. Gudiya tries to get information about Kalki from his fellow musicians. She comes to know that Kalki was an orphan and his
name was also Kedar, which implied bastard. His father was a Nepali and his mother a maidservant. They lived together in the absence of his father’s legally wedded wife who later on discarded Kalki’s mother. Kalki desires to become a film star and Gudiya encourages him to go to Mumbai to make a career. She parts with her jewellery for giving money to Kalki. However Kalki disappears from Gudiya’s world and also the text but his disappearance does not affect Gudiya or her life in any way. Gudiya says, ‘…I accepted Kalki’s departure with resignation, and even a degree of relief’. Gudiya goes to Phoolwati’s house and the two of them live merrily.

Gudiya states that there had not been any ‘model of masculinity’ since childhood for teaching her lessons of dependence as a woman. She does remember Kalki but she does not miss him desperately. She questions and blames herself for having given him opportunities to beat her and abuse her. Gudiya is a sensible woman who considers her husband’s absence as an opportunity for growth and for escape. She confesses her love for him but at the same time that love is not life. There is a time when Gudiya does feel lonely and lost but it is not because of a man. She
feels defeated and lonely after her grandmother’s death. Death was
not an unknown fact for Gudiya because she had seen her Mamaji
dangling on a mango tree; she had witnessed the death of Shambhu
and unfortunately she had been a witness to the tragic death of her
benefactor Roxanne Madam but Ammi had been her world and so
her death matters a lot to her.

Gudiya proves herself to be an embodiment of courage,
strength and practicality. She incites pity as well as commands
respect and is a person who can create a space for herself in this
mean and cruel world.

Another woman who is significantly present in the text is
Roxanne Lamba the philanthropic Principal of St. Jude’s School
for the socially handicapped. She is a rich and powerful woman
who keeps herself busy by doing socially constructive work, where
as her husband Mr. Lamba functions as her follower or a
beneficiary of her wealth. Roxanne loved Gudiya and singled her
out for her special attentions. Roxanne Lamba possesses the desire
to adopt Gudiya. There is a conflict between Phoolwati and
Roxanne over Gudiya as both shower love on her. Roxanne takes
Gudiya to her house but her husband seems to disapprove it.
Gudiya appreciates Roxanne Lamba for her beauty, intelligence and able administrative qualities. She is thankful to Roxanne’s rigorous English language training. Roxanne stands for dignity and philanthropy. She makes Gudiya a beneficiary of her wealth. This decision shows Roxanne’s as an independent decision maker in aspects of wealth and property.

Namita Gokhale’s characters take a revolutionary turn in subverting the politics of gender. She highlights the rights of earning women and asserts that women should and do have the ability to take decisions related to money and property. By bringing Gudiya to her house, Roxanne exhibits the feminine grit, authority and power that have been subdued through ages of suppression, dominance and patriarchal authority.

Lila is another person who is a silent or rather meek but important member of the world of women. Lila is a devoted follower of Ammi and displays unflinching commitment to her. The relationship between Lila and Ammi is that of trust and faith but Phoolwati and Lila never agree with each other on any issue related to the temple or decisions regarding Gudiya. Lila represents mothers who are discarded as useless objects in their old age. She
also represents strength, determination and will power. Lila’s silence is highly eloquent. The throwing away of her jewels (instead of giving them to her son) marks the beginning of women’s refusal to be used in different roles.

*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994) does defy the traditional patriarchal systems and authority by creating ‘a brave new women’s world’. All the women play a very significant role in unveiling the hidden façade of the feminine strength and potency. For ages, human experience has been tantamount only with the masculine experience. Female experience has been unnoticed and unregarded and at the same time unrewarded. This is what Michael Foucault addresses as ‘discontinuity’ or ‘rupture’ in history. Carl Jung considers a woman the prime mover of the psychic activity, which transcends the limit of consciousness. But, unfortunately the female experiences have been either silenced as inconsequential or ignored conveniently. The novel reinforces the contemporary advances in psycholinguistics and social linguistics that reveal female sex to be as powerful and precise as the male sex in the domain of romantics and syntax.
Phoolwati and Gudiya stay together as each others soul mates. Though, Phoolwati strongly feels that Sundar would have located Kalki she assures Gudiya that Gudiya’s life was better off without Kalki. Gudiya, too, is never shown to miss Kalki in her life neither does she miss him in the context of their child. Gudiya confesses that she had forgotten Kalki and promises herself:

When enough time passes, and the dust settles on those troubled memories, perhaps I shall be able to embellish them with a veil of fabulism and mystery. Rendering the past acceptable, if not accountable, is a talent I inherited from my Ammi.

Gudiya’s acceptance of the facts shows great moral courage and preparedness of a young girl to live alone and bring up her girl child. She lives with Phoolwati, which symbolizes a departure from dependence on men for emotional security and economical support.

Subhash Chandra observes:

Gokhale effects a paradigm-shift in the position of her women who are Autonomous and do not depend for their survival, as Manu postulates, on their fathers, husbands or sons. They have the requisite strength to
Face life with all its ups and downs; they are sharply etched out in terms of their self and identity. They are cast in the mould of the New Woman who solves her problems herself, and is assertive, practical and resilient. 28

_A Himalayan Love Story_ (1996) is the story of progression of Parvati from girlhood - innocence to womanhood – experience, and ultimately and unfortunately insanity. It is a love story of a boy from Jeolikote who truly loves a girl and then witnesses her become insane. Parvati is a beautiful woman who is fated to doom. Her life is a perennial quest for love and its reciprocation. By the time she realizes that she truly loves her husband he is dead due to consumption, leaving her pregnant.

Parvati’s life can be understood in four stages viz (1) her life with her mother; (2) her life with her uncle; and (3) her life after marriage and (4) her life after her husband’s death. In each of these four stages Namita Gokhale reveals a strategy to pit Parvati against gender impositions.

The novel is a successful account of a woman’s tragic existence and constant yearning. Parvati has physical relations with
her history teacher Salman and her husband’s younger brother Raju but she feels relieved when both of them go away from her life. Parvati’s sexual indulgence with both the men is symbolic of the incompleteness of marriage which precipitates to being a mere contract.

The novel powerfully evokes the feminine force. All the activities are controlled in a sense by the primordial feminine force. And desire, passion, love and fulfillment are elemental to the feminine. Parvati’s affairs highlight the turmoil in her mind.

Relationships can be viewed and analysed from various standpoints. Parvati’s and her mothers relationship, Parvati and her husband Lalit Joshi, Parvati and her first love Salman, Parvati and her co-brother Raju, Parvati and Hiranand Joshi her step uncle, and Parvati and Mukul Nainwal the person who truly loves her. The novel begins on a very negative note. As a child, Parvati is highly observant of people and their facial expressions. Namita Gokhale uses the imagery of a cage to describe the body: I felt trapped inside my skin and bone and circumstance and for this reason I began at a very early age to avoid people. 29
Parvati is a fatherless child who lives with her mother in Jeolikote a tourist halt on the way to Nainital. She describes Jeolikote as a place where people did not have much to converse and there was nothing exciting about it. Parvati’s mother had been a complete illiterate and considered educating Parvati as a waste of money for the only reason that Parvati was a “daughter”. She used to tell Parvati with hatred that had she been a boy she would have earned and looked after her mother.

“It would be different if you were a boy,” she would say angrily, then, you could earn and provide for me in my old age. But all you are going to do is get married to some no-good and take away my champakali necklace off with you as dowry. It’s a double curse, first to be born a woman, and then get straddled with another female to provide for. 30

Namita Gokhale has critiqued the unequal treatment given to boys and girls (sons and daughters). The Indian society is plagued by such people who deny girls their basic rights. Education is a farfetched dream for girls.
Parvati grows up into a woman who is incomplete. She tries to attain fulfillment by indulging in pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships.

Parvati’s relationship with her mother can be understood in terms of the above quote. Parvati’s mother curses herself for being a woman and for having a daughter to bring up. She considers Parvati a burden and refuses to educate her. Parvati, however, loves her mother and considers her pious. When she spots her mother in the arms of Shrikrishnaji, the shopkeeper and consuming liquor she says,

My world was shattered. People were not as they appeared. There was another life behind their masks. 31

Parvati assures herself that the woman she had seen in Shrikrishnaji’s arms was not her mother but a wraith. Parvati continues to spy her mother and witnesses her mother’s sacrilegious act. She believes that her mother was possessed by spirits and keeps her mothers pious image intact. When Parvati is shifted to Lata Sah, a rich classmate’s bungalow for a night during
her mother’s illness she is embraced by Mrs. Sah. The tinkling of gold bangles reminds Parvati of her mother’s work-worn hands. Parvati lives with her rich unmarried uncle Mr. Hiranand Joshi after her mother’s death. Hiranand Joshi was a scholarly teacher and was addressed as Masterji. He admits Parvati into a school, wherefrom begins Parvati’s new journey. She manages the household affairs with ease and she gives its credit to her poor economical condition. She also enjoys the ‘special attention’ she receives from Masterji’s colleagues and students:

He looked at me with undisguised adoration, and gradually I began to see myself through his eyes, as a beautiful young woman. 32

Parvati’s second phase of life thus begins, with attention and adoration of men. She gets occupied with her physical self. She tries to colour her lips and augment her scanty eyebrows with eyebrow pencil. But, unfortunately she has to do all these things only in secrecy as she is afraid of her uncle. As a young and maturing girl she cannot freely make herself look beautiful and attractive.
Parvati’s series of relationships begins with Salman Siddiqui, a senior class History teacher. She gets impressed by his looks, knowledge and composure. She appreciates Salman for his deep knowledge of the convoluted history of Christianity, Spanish history and the Moorish influences in European architecture. She feel strongly attracted towards Salman and wishes for an, ‘expeditious disposal’ of her intact hymen. Parvati is well aware of the religious disparity yet she is convinced about her relationship. She left Wee Nooke as a girl but returned as a woman. She starts looking beautiful as a result of the fulfillment of her desire with the man of her dreams. The change in Parvati is noticed only by the maidservant Munnibee: The only person I could not fool was the maidservant, Munnibee. She was a woman… 33

The affair between Salman and Parvati is short lived. She does not hear from him for a long time and is unaware about his whereabouts. She is however informed by Mukul, Lalit and Munnibee that he had left Nainital as he was involved in a scandalous affair with a nurse and the nurse had slashed her wrists for him. This incident brings Salman’s character to light as a
womanizer. Parvati stoically accepts the whole thing, “I had known in our very first meeting that he was only a shadow.” 34

This statement is an assertion of a woman’s sixth sense and her determination to fulfill her yearning despite the knowledge that a man would desert her after having used her. The affair can be looked upon as Parvati’s confidence and grit to gratify her desires. She possesses the daring to accept Salman’s departure with courage. When Parvati reaches the marriageable age (20 yrs) she is informed by Masterji that he had chosen a boy for her to get married. This is certainly a statement on the institution of marriage. A girl is merely informed about the most important event in her life. She is not consulted or given a choice either. After Masterji’s announcement Parvati feels: But Masterji could not be expected to understand that I was a woman… 35

Parvati confesses that Salman’s rejection had not hurt her but she feels ‘diminished’ after he goes away. A sense of being objectified and trivialized keeps haunting her:

Salman had not considered me important enough to stay on for, he had not even bothered to bid me goodbye. 36
The third stage in Parvati’s life covers the major part of her struggle for her existence as a woman in the role of a wife. As a daughter in law Parvati is duteous, doting and affectionate. She displays her culinary skills and showers affection on her in laws. She is appreciated by all the family members and is considered ‘an accomplished and dashing new addition to the extended family.’ Parvati and Lalit do not share any proximity as man and wife. They live together as strangers:

I found it unpleasant to live in such close proximity to a man. Lalit Was not very clean in his personal habits, and a dank, stale smell of sweat sat upon his body. It rose like a miasma from his clothes when I washed them, the very memory of it made me gag. At night we slept beside each other on a narrow bed like hostile strangers. 37

These lines speak volumes about many such Parvatis who have to come to terms with the life after marriage. Parvati has to wear a cloak of happiness. She lives in a joint family, which provides her and Lalit very little scope for bridging their differences. She encourages her small nephews and nieces to sleep in her room and uses their presence as an ‘effective shield against
the cold hostility of their nights together.’ Parvati expresses her skepticism about the consummation of her marriage. Even after a year of marriage Lalit and Parvati sleep in separate beds. The family expects ‘good news’ from Parvati’s ‘neglected womb.’ Parvati is physically assaulted and called ‘prying whore’ for reading a letter that is addressed to both Lalit and Parvati. Parvati always hopes that her relationship will blossom and she would be able to lead a normal life. But unfortunately:

> My silence, my calm, as I sleepwalked through this unexpected role, was construed by our happy group as the praiseworthy reticence normal to the Indian woman, it aroused no questions or comments. 38

With the passage of time, the relation between Parvati and her husband stiffens and they communicate only if necessity arose. Parvati shifts herself into the kitchen during nights. She feels that the mice and cockroaches in the kitchen were less hostile and dangerous than Lalit. During nights Parvati feels that her life was doomed and she would never be relieved from the sufferings.

Marriage is projected as a devastating experience for Parvati as she lives a loveless life. She cannot express her feelings
to anybody, she starts neglecting herself. But, Parvati’s life takes a twist with the arrival of Lalit’s younger brother Raju. Parvati finds him charming and attractive and she befriends him. Parvati feels that he was like her:

…I looked at his tender young face, which was not a mask, he had not then the smell of the other; he was an ally, he was like me, we were both lonely, our needs possessed us, and we made uncompromising, uncomplicated love. 39

Parvati and Raju indulge guiltlessly in sex which is the consequence of physical and psychological neglect. Parvati defies Lalit’s order by refusing to sleep in the bedroom after the arrival of Raju. Parvati confesses that she once again has the urge for looking attractive and beautiful. Her skin starts glowing as a result of the satiation of her physical needs. After Raju’s departure Parvati feels rejuvenated. She does not miss him but remembers the moments of pleasure and admits that:

…Even after his departure I continued to feel an extraordinary sense of well-being. The new Parvati, this confident and happy woman I had mysteriously become, could even cope with Lalit. 40
Parvati always imagines her life in a perfect marital harmony. She imagines Lalit bringing flowers for her, shopping with her and buying beautiful sarees for her. These are extremely petty desires of Parvati that remain unfulfilled. She pines for him on the psychological as well as physical level. However Parvati comes to terms with all that life has exposed her to. Parvati feels satisfied with the compliments given to her by Lalit on her cooking. Though Parvati indulges in a physical relationship with Raju, her husband’s younger brother she has a yearning for Lalit’s love and attention.

Parvati even endures the pain and suffering inflicted upon her by her husband. She and Lalit, start loving each other but unfortunately Lalit is detected of tuberculosis. Parvati takes life in her stride,

In a strange progress, I learnt to dissemble, and in the process I learnt to love. I can in retrospect honestly say that by the time he died, I had learnt to love Lalit. 41

At one point of time we feel that Parvati is a liberated woman with a mind and body of her own. She can be interpreted as
a wrong, modern, emancipated and independent female but her insanity proves the reader wrong.

The tragedy of Parvati’s life does not end with Lalit’s death. After Lalit’s death, Parvati gets to know about her pregnancy. The fourth phase of her life is more tragic because Parvati loses her sanity. She gives birth to her daughter in the state of insanity. The disasters in Parvati’s life finally turn her into a lunatic. Her mental condition raises a very crucial question as to who is responsible for the abuse of a woman. Her maternal uncle writes to Mukul Nainwal, Parvati’s childhood friend, informing him about Parvati’s insanity and refers to her daughter Irra as a burden on him. Mukul, worked for the International Relief Organisation, so he was considered trustworthy and capable of taking care of financial matters by Hiranand Joshi. As Mukul travels to Nainital he recalls the past, a past in which he had loved the now insane Parvati. He laments the life of the hills,

Lalit was long dead and Parvati confined to the mental asylum in Barielly. That was how hope and beauty usually ended here in our hills. 42

Mukul had truly loved Parvati but due to her uncles belief in caste system he is unable to Marry Parvati. On seeing Irra Mukul
deeply feels that she would have been his and Parvati’s daughter. Despite Mukul’s love for Parvati, he is unable to forget and forgive Parvati for telling him that she would have never married him.

He does not share a healthy relationship with his wife Adrienne, an Anglo-Burmese woman or with his step daughter either. Mukul’s love for Parvati was true and genuine. He had known,

…That Parvati was prone to depression: her playful gaiety alternated frequently with long, silent spells, when her eyes would darken and take on an even more terrifying beauty than when she was happy. 43

Mukul is pained to know that Parvati’s widowhood and insanity were not looked upon by compassion and sympathy. Hiranand Joshi had her sent to her in-laws but they feel that the two women would be an economic burden on them burden and unfortunately Parvati was sent to an asylum. Irра was left at the mercy of Mukul. This is the frailty of relationships, especially when a woman becomes useless or is yet to attain the age of being useful. Mukul’s meeting with Parvati is an unfortunate event. He repents for having loved her.
I felt a primal revulsion. It was a mistake.
She was an imposter. I suspected her of sanity. I had never loved her. 44

He suspects her ingenuity and true love gets transformed into hate and disgust. Mukul brings Parvati and Irra to his hotel room but at that point of time his strength and courage break away and he runs away from there. He feels as though he should return to Adrienne because he loved her.

Mukul’s behaviour and escape from Nainital raises certain questions related to the emotional and physical status of Parvati. The reluctance of Parvati’s cousin Puran and his family to look after the helpless woman is a reflection of the neglect faced by a woman on account of her inability to be useful to the family. She is perceived as a threat to the security of the family. Though Mukul realizes his fault he does not display the courage to accept Parvati and her daughter. He makes great claims about his love for Parvati but when she needs him he abandons her and leaves her to face life in an unsound mental state.

Thus, the novel explores lives of women living in dependant and deplorable conditions, their love, their longing, yearning and
ultimately their fate. They are dominated by tradition, religion, society and above all the system willfully designed by men.

The protagonist Shakuntala of Namita Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is named after the fifth century dramatist Kalidasa’s heroine Sakuntala. While the original Sakuntala is a helpless nymph who is deserted by her husband King Dushyanta and needs her mother Menaka, ‘the celestial apsara,’ to put things right for her, Gokhale’s mortal Shakuntala is bold and restless at a time when women are confined to the household:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa’s classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was a nymph, daughter of the celestial apsara Menaka who seduced the sage Vishwamitra and stole his seed. That Shakuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her birth-father Vishwamitra and later by her husband Dushyanta- one could say that she carried within herself the samskaras of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name. 45

Shakuntala questions the rules and customs of society, and when the opportunity arrives, she goes out into the unknown to satisfy her adventurous spirit. She defies the myth of Shakuntala
who lived a life of seclusion till her husband Dushyanta remembered her and took her back to the kingdom with dignity. But Namita Gokhale’s Shakuntala is a subverted version of the myth. Jane Bow’s comment on myth is noticeable at this juncture:

Myths are about archetypal energies at work inside each one of us, between individuals in relationship, and in society as a whole. These archetypes represent the different powers that make life. 46

Shakuntala is born into a poor ‘vanavi’ family, hill people who live near the forests of the mountainous areas in India. She grows up roaming the woods, and spends her time watching clouds and birds. But, she is reprimanded by her mother for playing, for being a child and moreover for being a girl:

You wicked, heartless girl!” She shrieks.
“Were you born only to trouble and torment me?” 48

Shakuntala does not share the loving rapport with her mother and maintains a distance from her. Right from her childhood, Shakuntala experiences a strain in her relationship with her mother that was engendered, surely, by her being a female baby. Consequently, she expresses her disgust for her mother:
I hated everything about my mother, from her tangled hair to her shuffling gait and her cracked, dirty feet. I did not ever want to become like her. 49

Shakuntala’s brother Govinda is predicted to be a great rishi, a descendent of a great line of sages. Their mother gives all her attention to his education and care, neglecting her and reminding her of her gender-

My mother never fatigued of telling me not to fancy myself a scholar, as the scriptures were forbidden to women. 50

As a child Shakuntala is curious and eager to learn Grammar, Sanskrit and Scriptures but she is denied education on account of her gender. She considered household work a burden and manages to cope with the drudgery by eavesdropping in on her brother’s lessons delivered by a tutor. In these secretly heard lessons Shakuntala hears the story of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala which ignites a spark of desire in her mind about her prince who would come riding by and carry her away into a dreamland. Shakuntala’s journey towards her doom begins from her childhood. Once deeply hurt by the mother, Shakuntala runs away from home and meets a rock-demoness who gives her shelter. She teaches Shakuntala about the many faces of the mother-goddess who takes
many forms, but is always "Swamini, mistress of herself." She also warns Shakuntala that there is little place in your world for strong women, but none for weak.

Shakuntala is married off to a wealthy man, and although they share a happy life, seeing traders and pilgrims and horses, Shakuntala feels there are 'thoughts and events and people' in far off lands that she is yet to see and experience. If men can travel and seek, why is it 'unseemly and inappropriate' for women? When her husband brings home a mysterious handmaiden from his travels, Shakuntala is consumed with jealousy. While praying by the Ganga, she meets a Greek traveler and runs away with him leaving her respectable home. Shakuntala wanders with him from place to place and gives up all her societal bindings to lead a life of pleasure. But this carefree lifestyle is not enough to satiate her restlessness and she wanders off in the holy city of Kashi.

In the novel, Gokhale's language flows easily, and has a wistful edge to it, which serves as a reminder of the many precious things Shakuntala has lost in her lifetime. The tone of the novel is quiet and a bit haunting, because of the supernatural and the mystic
that have a constant presence in the background of the story. Perhaps this is enhanced by the knowledge that Shakuntala is already dead at the beginning of the novel, and the story is a flashback recounted by her spirit.

Gokhale draws deeply from Hindu mythology and philosophy, and although some of the symbolism in *Shakuntala* can be easily understood, others are vague. The metaphorical use of incidents and dialogues adds to the magic and mystique of the novel. Any reader, who is not well versed with the Hindu philosophy, too can get a feel of the mythological Shakuntala and understand the newly created Shakuntala.

It took Gokhale five years to write *Shakuntala*, and in her own words, it is 'her most painstaking work.' Shakuntala's grievances about being oppressed and her restlessness are constantly brought up by Shakuntala herself as she narrates her story.

The novel successfully transcends the plight of an oppressed woman storyline, and it is, at the end, about a woman who lives life her own way, in defiance of social and religious obstacles.
Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* points out that a great work by a woman must be about something more than just the struggles of women in a male-dominated world, and *Shakuntala* does succeed in that aspect.

Namita Gokhale’s protagonists project different hues of the feminine. Her women assert their desires and make efforts towards fulfilling them. They display the grit required for survival in the society despite their mythological names they represent the ‘New Woman.’ It should be noted that Gokhale’s women protagonists and narrators viz. Priya, Gudiya, Shakuntala and Parvati belong to the not-so-rich-stratum of the society which is important from the point of view of the development of the characters. To quote K.Venkatarayappa:

A female child brought up in penury is a more seriously deformed person than a male child under the same conditions. Wedded life is a continuous adventure. Love – even the love sentiment in woman – requires constant and continuous nourishment and replenishment. It is a twinning of hearts which is also a halving of each. It is an ecstasy of what is suffered, or borne, yielded sacrificed as well as the things that are won, achieved or accomplished. It is the emptying of one’s life as well as filling it. It is dying as well as living. 51
These words aptly summarise the woman and her psyche, her wishes and desires, yearnings and longings. Roshan Shahani says:

The abandonment of a progressive vision and the co-option of the Woman’s movement by the conservative forces takes on many forms. Yet, another construction of the “New Indian Woman” can thus be perceived in the contemporary discourse of women in India. This ‘liberated’ modern woman can draw sustenance from the dominant elite class to which she belongs, while simultaneously appropriating the voice of modernity and the women’s movement in a facile tokenist fashion. 52

Gokhale’s presentation of women, thus, takes into its fictional account all those issues that ultimately reflect upon their precarious conditions in a society that is governed by male supremacy. Her portrayal of the women living in the mountains adds very meaningful dimensions to her gender dialectics. This concern with the average and the ordinary women, especially, underscores the problems of education and exposure, innocence and experience, discrimination and exploitation that this deprived stratum of Indian society are often confronted with and it is this concern with the marginalised mountain women that turns her fiction into an interrogation against the dominant gender dynamics.
References

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