Chapter VI

SHAKUNTALA: THE PLAY OF MEMORY

Namita Gokhale's novel Shakuntala: The Play of Memory is one of the best works she has written in the last fifteen years. She has established her reputation as one of India's greatest feminist writers. Her interest in Indian mythology is well known. She felt indebted to the great poet Kalidasa. Kalidasa was the brightest jewel in the court of King Vikramaditya of Ujjaini. Her novel Shakuntala is based on the story of the famous play Abhijnana Shakuntalam written by Kalidas. In this novel Namita Gokhale has presented the story of a girl named Shakuntala who remembered her past life. The writer has belief in rebirth and the Hindu mythology. According to Hindu mythology, it is considered that the soul never dies as it is immortal. Like Plato and Pythagoras and Wordsworth, Namita Gokhale also believed in the transmigration of the soul.

The novel opens with the picture of Kashi, the city of Shiva. The narrator is Shakuntala who remembers her first sight of Kashi. She begins to dream of her previous birth. In her dreams she sees many images and begins to think of the purpose of life. What is death? What is the mystery of life? What do we live for? Why do me die? Can one run away from the self? Does
the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river ever slake its waters? She asks the priest on the Ghat – Why do these memories persist? Shakuntala accepts the belief that to die in Kashi is to escape the cycle of birth and death. But Shakuntala who dies in the city of Shiva, the destroyer of memory, has not forgotten her previous life. She remembers that Shakuntala was the daughter of a Vaidya, a doctor of medicinal plants, and her mother had learnt a little about healing from him. Her father died when she was only five years old. She had a brother only a year older than her. The astrologer had foretold that he would be a great sage. So her mother always looked after her son, properly and ensured that he got the opportunities he deserved. Since childhood Shakuntala was a thoughtful girl who used to think about her name as she said:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa’s classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was 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 birthfather 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.¹

Shakuntala had a keen desire to know her inner self. She was a courageous child and felt no fear while she walked alone in the forest. She thought that it was her mother who named her Shakuntala. She had the desire to know — why she was named Shakuntala but she never asked her mother. Why? She thought that her mother was no nymph or apsara like the mother of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. She grew up in mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic. All day she roamed in the hills without any fear of forest animals:

All day I roamed the hills, where the forests abound with deer and stag, where tigers and panthers prowl. My mother had warned me to beware of the shalabhanjikas, forest spirits who enticed and enslaved young girls, but I loved the woods, and would return home reluctantly only when the shadows lengthened and the trees whispered like ghostly spirits. I was always cautious, though, and kept to the pathways and clearings. I thought I knew how to stay out of trouble, and was restless to see the world, to
wander with the freedom of birds and clouds

(Shakuntala 8).

She loved the woods and yet was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds. Her brother Govinda was a man of destiny, whose purpose was to restore order and true Dharma to the world. His tutor was an admirer of classical poetry and it was through his tutor that Shakuntala heard of Kalidasa, the great poet of Magadha. Shakuntala had the curiosity to know the story of Kalidasa's Shakuntala. His tutor told her the various virtues of Shakuntala and also that she fell in love with King Dushyanta when he came to hunt in the forest. Then he narrated how they got married secretly and Shakuntala lost the ring. He also gave her a book, the manuscript of Kalidasa's Abhijana Shakuntalam. He also explained her why Kalidasa's heroine was named Shakuntala. After hearing the story of Kalidasa's Shakuntala, she began to think:

What would happen if I were to share her fate, I wondered. Would mother nature be as kind to me

(Shakuntala 24)?

After sometime Shakuntala was married to Srijan. Srijan knew her since she was a child. Shakuntala was his third wife. His other wives were dead and had not given him any children.
Srijan was a mahasaamant, a rich man, the chief of fourteen villages. Srijan's mother followed the path of Buddha. She had become a nun and shaved her hair before she died. The married life of Shakuntala was very decent and Srijan was very courteous to her. But she was not satisfied as she always remembered the words of the Bhikkuni - 'Arise, commence a new life.' She felt envy for her mother-in-law and her hard-won freedom. She often went to the abandoned temple and sat in the shadow of the wooden pillars where the swallows sheltered, listening to the lazy rustle of the afternoon breeze. She felt a great curiosity in her heart to know more and more as her mind was restless. She said:

I would look at the sky and think of nothing, sensing in my heart that there were thoughts and events and people that beckoned. What had sparked such wild, dangerous dreams I could not say. Perhaps it was my husband Srijan and his tales of travel, or simply the consequence of foolish, imaginative and reckless nature (Shakuntala 45-46).

Namita Gokhale has presented Shakuntala as a very curious character who has keen desire to know more, see more and do
more. Though Srijan had provided her all the comforts in home yet she did not feel satisfaction. She remarked:

I was hungry for experience. There were things I wanted to see, to know, to do. My ignorance irked me; I had, for example, never actually viewed an elephant. I had heard that the mrighastin, described as the beast with a hand, was the noblest and wisest of animals (Shakuntala 46).

Shakuntala had her own vision of freedom. She had irresistible hunger to see new lands and people and said:

I knew there was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, 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 (Shakuntala 48).

Shakuntala was a learned woman who could argue with the scriptures in her mind. She thought of her mother-in-law - why did she renounce the home? What was the reason that she became a nun? She remarked:
She had a husband and a young son, a home and a kitchen. What was she searching for, why did she go away? She spent the rest of her years with faithful Sangha in a monastery. Srijan never talked about his mother, yet her departure must surely have caused him pain (Shakuntala 43).

Srijan was anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre and so decided to perform Agnicayana ritual. At that time Shakuntala thought that she had not been successful in performing her duties as a wife. Although Srijan was too kind to show his disappointment at her infertility, the ritual reminded her of her inadequacies. Once when Srijan returned from his travels, he returned with a woman who was beautiful and looked like a crane in flight. She had been brought as the handmaiden of Shakuntala. But Shakuntala did not like her arrival and went to the Matrika Temple. She thought that the woman was a temptress, unsurper of her joys. She said:

I was not angry with Srijan – he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. But the hurt and betrayal, the prickling of thorns under the sheath of my skin – I had never known or anticipated these feelings, just as I had never expected my husband to return
from his journey to the east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes (Shakuntala 58).

Though Srijan loved Shakuntala very much, yet she was constantly troubled by the questions – who was she? Why had Srijan brought her into our household? But she did not know what to do with her? She has no need of a Daasi! After sometime she felt some strange happenings, disturbing omens. She decided to have a talk with her friend the fisherman. But Shakuntala was not satisfied with his explanation. When she knew that Kamalini had a child, a handsome boy, she was filled with anger and fear. Her mind was haunted by the questions – Whose child was it? What was her relationship with my husband? Why had Kamalini left her son behind? What is she doing in my home? All these questions tortured her mind. But alas! She could not get the answers of these questions. At that time she felt the world was a place of treason, not of trust. Sometimes she was haunted by wild fancies. She thought to be a monk or nun like Srijan’s mother. She said:

Perhaps I too could become a monk or a renunciate. Our religion had no place for women, but the Buddhist orders inducted women as novices. Like Srijan’s mother, I would sport a shaved head and wear ochre robes to live a life
of penitence. I would walk and travel and see the world (Shakuntala 88).

But she rejected the whole idea to follow the course of Srijan's mother because becoming a nun would be a defeat to Kamalini. She sought solace in the rhythm of cowsheds. Sometimes she used to walk through the forest to the abandoned temple because she did not want to see Kamalini. When she entered the temple, she was surprised to see an old crone there. The old woman followed her in. The old woman knew her but Shakuntala had no remembrance. When she saw that old woman, she began to think:

What would I be like when I was her age, when my hair was moon-white and my spine bent? Would I have sons and daughters to carry on our line? Would the sons be good to me, would their wives cherish me? Would I, dreaded thought, have to take myself to the forest, condemn myself to the life of a lonely old crone because my lord and master Srijan had taken on new and younger wives (Shakuntala 94)?

Namita Gokhale had presented Shakuntala as a great scholar who had full knowledge of Dharma. As she said:
The Manava Dharma Shastra says: 'A barren wife should be abandoned in the tenth year, one who bears only daughters in the twelfth, and one whose children all die in the fifteenth' (Shakuntala 95).

Shakuntala did not allow herself to be disappointed. She consoled herself by thinking that Kamalni is only a Daas and her husband had no relation with her. When she came home with Srijan, she visited the village priest as she had seen something strange and requested him to interpret the omen. She took the help of that village priest to be happy and she told him — 'It is a child I want. A child would change everything.' Hearing this the priest said, 'You are but a child yourself.' And began to hum something. He blessed Shakuntala and said:

'I am worried about you, sister Shakuntala', he said. 'You wander about the woods at night, far from your hearth and home and respected husband. You while away your time with that foolish fisherman and forget the duties of a woman and a wife. The mahasamant Srijan is a mighty man, a wealthy man. Why is it you are not happy (Shakuntala 103)?
But Shakuntala could not answer these questions. She said that she wanted to see the world. Now Shakuntala thought that she had no need of the prayers of the village priest. She thought of Dasyu, the cow and her calf and hoped for a daughter. In the month of Vaishakh, she went to the temple of Gangadwar. Kamalini was also with her. But when she went there, everything was changed to her. When she had worshipped the river, she saw a man before her and she was enchanted by his smile. She said:

My life has changed; I feel that I cannot go back to where I have come from. Every limb in my body is alive, and yet I am rested and satiated. Nothing has prepared me for this ecstasy. It defies my life and destiny, disengaging it from the wheel of duty and what should be, throwing it directly into my own hands (Shakuntala 110).

She further said:

Two voices rise within. One guiding me to return home, away from this violation, this absolute mockery of the matrimonial promises of love. The other, buzzing about my ears like a bhramari, a lascivious bee, urges me to flee, run away as far and as fast as I can, before Kamalini
and the palanquin-bearers, intruders from another
life, come in search of me (Shakuntala 111).

Shakuntala was leading a happy life now. She was pregnant
and her husband loved her very much but she was so much
fascinated towards the Yavana that she went to the temple of
Gangadwar again and visited Nearchus the Yavana. The Yavana
led her to his horse and on that shore she left Shakuntala and all
her memories. When Nearchus asked her name, she replied
‘Yaduri’. Now she did not care for her husband or her home. She
wanted to fulfil her desire to travel and so felt very happy now.
She said:

I took to my changed circumstances with ease. I
did not think of the house in the mountains. The
young woman called Yaduri had no history. She
lived in the ceaseless present. Only the river
travelled with her, its murmur in her life-blood
(Shakuntala 129).

Shakuntala travelled many cities – Kashi, Patliputra,
Mathura, Magadha, Mithila etc. She enjoyed the Yavana’s way of
love-making. Though sometimes he was rough and coarse, yet she
was happy in the company of Yavana. She remarked:
I was greedy for these stories and tried to memorize the strange names he spoke and hold on to them as imagined pictures in my head. Nearchus told me of the ocean, where the rivers go when they leave the land. I could not picture it—water and more water as far as the eye can see... The world was a wild and wondrous place, and I was glad to be free and alone and travelling its surface with this Yavana who had seen and known so much (Shakuntala 134).

Even Nearchus was surprised to see her hunger for the smallest knowledge or information. He said:

You are a peculiar woman, you find more pleasure in my tongue than in my kisses! Do you really want to know more about trade and commerce (Shakuntala 136)?

He further said:

You are probably not a female at all. You are not vain, you do not complain while travelling, and you take interest in the most unusual things (Shakuntala 136)!
Nearchus brought Yaduri to his home. But after sometime she was fed up with this new life and saw Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam enacted, she remembered her past. Now she realized that she betrayed her husband. She remarked:

Even in the moment of her disgrace, Kalidasa's Shakuntala had the sanctity of the secret marriage. But I had betrayed everything. I had renounced my name, I was no longer Shakuntala, only Yaduri, the unmentionable one, I had abandoned the husband whose true wife I was. No matter that he had other wives before me. The noble king Dushyanta had wives aplenty, and yet there was no slur in his love-making with Shakuntala. The apsara Menaka whose daughter Shakuntala was, had seduced the great sage Vishwamitra – but then she was an immortal, and such deeds are permitted to nymphs and celestials. Only I stood condemned (Shakuntala 150).

Now Shakuntala compares her present with her past. She remarks:
And I am different as well. This is not she who sat beside a man in an antelope skin and drank of the sacred some wine. Who was it that listened to the difficult wisdom of the fisherman, who sat the night through in the abandoned temple and watched the oil lamp flicker on the yoni made of stone? This is not her. This is another; she knows no reproach, for so utter is her destruction that she is no longer there to be reproached. This is a woman without recourse (Shakuntala 160).

Her mind was totally troubled now with the questions - What am I doing here? Why did I come here? She felt that all this happened with her because her name is Shakuntala. Now she realizes that it is the nature of woman to have children and grandchildren and see them grow. She thought that because of her name she suffered all these difficulties. She remarks:

There is a child in my belly and I have fled from our home. What madness overcame me that day by the river? Perhaps that woman Kamalini, my dimly remembered rival, had cast a spell upon me. Perhaps it was not her doing at all, for I was born under the star of exile, like my namesake Shakuntala (Shakuntala 166).
Now she does not want to live in the company of that Yavana. She felt that her desire to know more to see more, to experience more was no longer strong. She desired to go to the abandoned temple where she visited the goddess. She realizes:

One might travel for many nights and days but the place where one began was perhaps the only place where one belonged (Shakuntala 172).

Shakuntala came to Kashi and there she surrenders to a world of pleasure, travelling in the complete freedom from rules and bonds that she has always desired. Now she was all alone, no one’s wife or mistress or sister. She listened The Puranas from the mouth of a Brahmin. She saw different sights and great monks and worshippers there. At that time she remembers Bhikkuni’s words and planned to go to a monastery, a Buddhist Sangha and to follow the path of Srijan’s mother.

Now the question arises – Does Shakuntala suffer only because of her name? She always feels that she is born under the star of exile and she has the seed of abandonment like the heroine of Kalidasa’s epic. But her thought is not justified as there is a difference between the heroine of Kalidasa and Shakuntala. Shakuntala of Kalidasa’s epic suffers because she married secretly but she does not betray her husband. She is so
much fascinated towards the Yavana that she left herself and all her memories on the riverbank. She is not forgotten by her husband like Kalidasa’s Shakuntala but it is she who forgets her husband and her past and begins to lead a new life with a new name ‘Yaduri’. Like Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, she is the lover of nature. But her desire to know more, to experience more is totally different. Namita Gokhale presents the story of a hillbilly girl whom she named Shakuntala. Shakuntala wants freedom and a life on her own terms but her desire is thwarted at every turn by circumstances. A few questions arise – Why does she leave her home and husband while her desire to get a child is about to be fulfilled? Whether running away was a talent she had been born with, or whether it was the rock-demoness who sowed the first seeds of self-destruction in Shakuntala? What was the madness that hovered her that day by the riverside? Why did she forget all her homely duties and the knowledge of Dharma? Was her rival Kamalini unlucky? Is the name Shakuntala bad in itself? Namita Gokhale presents Shakuntala as a seeker who follows the way of her fate without looking back and reaches Kashi, the holy city to search herself. Namita Gokhale discovers an entire world of meaning in her exploration of what the idea of Shakuntala can open up. The first time when Shakuntala runs away from home,
she finds refuge in a cave with a woman who introduces her to the mysteries and powers of the mother-goddess. She said:

Remember that in every one of her forms the goddess is always Swamini, mistress of herself (Shakuntala 35).

She further said:

You must be strong, Shakuntala, there is little place in your world for strong women, but none for the weak (Shakuntala 36).

Namita Gokhale raised the question of the equality of woman with man. Shakuntala has the longing to travel like man, but she is helpless. She wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She keeps her opinions to herself because she knows that scriptures are forbidden to women. Through Shakuntala Namita Gokhale remarks:

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 (Shakuntala 48)?

Shakuntala further said:
Men although they rule and direct the world, can lack perception in a way that is sometimes alarming to their mothers and sisters (Shakuntala 76).

According to Namita Gokhale, the feminine energy is the guiding source of the world. Through Guresvara she remarked:

The seven goddesses are the consorts of the gods. The Sapta Matrikas – Brahmans, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Narsimhi – are the feminine energies that activate our world. When joined by a male energy, they make for harmony and stability. After all, we are all children of the Eternal Mother (Shakuntala 76).

She further says that surely Shiva needed Shakti as Shakti needed Shiva. As men need women’s blood and women’s wombs, she raises the question – Why do the priests fear them so much? Why a woman is not allowed to travel like menfolk?

Namita Gokhale is indebted to Buddha’s principles. She asserts the influence of Buddha upon Shakuntala. Although he renounced the world, he did not renounce the world of women, for his mercy extends to all creation. She remarks:
Gautam Buddha was a prince of the Sakya tribe. Perturbed by the problems of life and death, the sorrows of the human state, he decided to set forth as a homeless wanderer in search of the truth. The Buddha escaped his palace walls to see and taste and feel the curious wonder that the world is (Shakuntala 43).

Like the great saints and philosophers, Namita Gokhale asks:

What do we live for? Why do we die? To run away, always to run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river slake its waters (Shakuntala 3)?

She further asks:

Does the body rule the mind or mind the body (Shakuntala 158)?

She has an urge to know the purpose of life. Death is inevitable, all would leave this world and move on to the one’s beyond. In Shakuntala she presents the conversation between Shakuntala and Kundan, the fisherman. Shakuntala asks:
I carried little faith in the village priest and his stories about the path of the soul after death, of the various levels of purgatory, of the pitralok and the heaven of Indra and so on. How, after all, could anybody who had not actually died know these things (Shakuntala 84)?

Shakuntala asks Kundan – What is death? Kundan answers:

‘... there is an element in which each of us survives, in which we can thrive. This fish, for instance, which is so happy in the water, which swims about without a care in the depths of the holy river, once this fish is out of its true element, released into the air that you and I can so easily breathe, it dies’ (Shakuntala 84).

He further tells her:

That is Death. It is the loss of our natural environment. If this fish could suddenly learn to breathe in air, it would continue to live, it could have an afterlife. There are creatures that can lead such double lives, such as frogs that crowd into your house during the rainy weather and there are beings who can do the same, who
continue to live on after they die, because they are not dependent on their bodies alone. As the frogs can live by your doorstep or in the village pond with equal ease, so these beings straddle both the worlds of the dead and the undead (Shakuntala 84-85).

Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala is thoughtful and ethical. She has firm faith in religion and Manava Shastras. When Shakuntala reaches Kashi, she listens a Vyasa, public reader of the sacred texts who was reciting tales from The Puranas to his audience.

In this book there is a certain simplification in the duality of choices that Namita Gokhale presents – brother-sister, tame Indian husband, wild Greek lover, the garden of her heroine's childhood against the turmoil of medieval Varanasi.

The book is mainly centred around Shakuntala who has her own vision of freedom. She is endowed with great courage and zeal. Since childhood she wants to know about Dharma and scriptures but she never told her opinions to her mother because the scriptures are forbidden to women. Her curiosity can be seen when she used to hear the religious texts narrated by the tutor of Guresvara. She used to discuss great philosophical facts with her brother but she never felt satisfied. Namita Gokhale, a feminist,
presents Shakuntala as a great thinker and scholar. Shakuntala meditates:

My brother Guresvara had studied philosophy under an Advaita guru a follower of the Shankaracharya. He had interminable debates at the monasteries with learned Buddhists and other disbelievers about the true nature of the self. ‘What is the self?’ they would query, importantly. Is it the body? Is it the mind? Is it the ego? I, Shakuntala, would have told them that it is none of these: the self is a seeding, a core, which observes, experiences, and persists even when everything else changes and passes (Shakuntala 48).

She thinks if her brother had listened to her she could have explained him—

... as I knew he was my brother and Srijan, my husband, I knew that I was I. The self that perceives the similarities between the past and the present, the self that does not forget, the self that is present in time, is me (Shakuntala 48-49).
Though Shakuntala wants to travel and see new lands like the free birds and cloud yet thinks of the duty of a wife. There is a conflict in her mind as she considers Kamalini her rival and wants to defeat her. Sometimes she thinks to roam in the world because she is always haunted by the Bhikkuni’s words – ‘Arise! Commence a new life!’ But how can one do that? She compares herself with her brother and says:

Guresvara was a scholar and a mendicant, he could think and dream and roam the world with the abandon of a wandering cloud. He was like me, and yet my complete opposite. I was a woman, it was my lot to please my husband, to live at his pleasure. Guresvara was his own master. But, although he did not know it, a bit of me travelled with him wherever he went. As a flea travels on a dog, or pollen on a bee, so my mind travelled with my brother (Shakuntala 68).

Namita Gokhale has endowed Guresvara with great virtues of head and heart. He was always very kind and courteous to everyone and never found fault with anyone. He was not a critic and never mocked anyone because he felt that everything and everyone in this world is the reflection of God. Shakuntala has great respect for her brother and says:
He was noble beyond belief, as of course he could afford to be, with only god and himself to worry about, and they being the same in his philosophy. Sometimes I would get irritated by his goodness, his humility, his unremitting courtesy, for in an inexplicable way all these qualities added up to nothing but a great arrogance. He believed only in what he called the 'sword-edge of discrimination' and he succeeded in making me feel selfish and stupid (Shakuntala 70).

However, Shakuntala often thinks herself superior to her brother. To her, he is far away from the travails of life and so does not know the reality of the world. She says:

Sometimes I felt that my brother, for all his wisdom, knew much less about real life than I did. He was the sequestered one, not me, for although he had travelled the world, as I had not, he chose to see only what he wanted to (Shakuntala 74).
Namita Gokhale creates characters with her imagination too. They possess beauty and are portrayed in an impressive way. The story moves around Shakuntala, Kamalini, Srijan, Nearchus, the old woman, Kundan and the fishersman.

Shakuntala is not happy to see Kamalini and examines her features in silence. Shakuntala remarks:

Her lips were large and sensuous, her neck a proud column. She was like a high-spirited stallion, or an unfolding lotus bud. I had always considered myself beautiful until the day I met her. Now I felt like an overgrown child or a gawky village woman (Shakuntala 65).

The arrival of Kamalini disturbs her mind. Yet she is charmed by the hair style of Kamalini. Namita Gokhale regards Kashi a holy city. In Hindu mythology it is considered that to die in Kashi is to get Moksha. Namita Gokhale also remarks:

Kashi, the city of Shiva. The faithful arrived here in the hope of departure, for to die in Kashi was to escape the remorseless cycle of birth and death. Shiva, bending over the dead and the dying, whispered his mantra of deliverance into the ears of corpses. The Taraka mantra liberated
them, ferried them across the river of oblivion to
the far shores of moksha (Shakuntala 137).

Like Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Namita Gokhale believes that this world with all its pleasures is an illusion. People are deceived by appearances and hanker after worldly goods. But they do not realize that they are running after Maya.

Emerson said:

Illusion works impenetrable,

Weaving webs innumerable,

Her gay pictures never fail,

Crowds each on other, veil on veil,

Charmer who will be believed.

By man who thirsts to be deceived.

(Maya)

Namita Gokhale also remarks:

Lord Vishnu comes among us to teach us that all is Maya. All pleasure, all pain is illusion. What you gain and what you lose, what is beautiful and
what is ugly — it is all the same illusion
(Shakuntala 184).

Like Wordsworth, Namita Gokhale has Platonic belief in
the pre-existence of the soul. The soul is divine and never dies.
Wordsworth compared birth with sleep. As sleep brings
forgetfulness, birth also brings forgetfulness about our previous
existence. Wordsworth said:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The sun that rises with us, our life’s star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:

(Ode On Intimations Of Immortality)

Namita Gokhale has great belief in rebirth. According to
Hindu mythology, it is considered that all beings take rebirth
because it is only body that dies and the soul enters the new
body. The cycle of birth and rebirth goes on. She presents her views in this novel through the priest. Shakuntala recalls her earlier life. She felt that Shakuntala died in Kashi, by the banks of the sacred river but found no peak. She asked a priest - Why do these memories persist? The priest told her:

Our pasts live on. Each one of us carries the residue of unresolved karmas, the burden of debts we have to repay. Sister, you cannot run away. Confront this life. Only in acceptance will you find release (Shakuntala 4).

She further remarks:

Shiva, it is said, is also Smarahaha, the destroyer of memory. I died in his city, but I have not forgotten. How her body hungered and contorted, as she feasted on the flesh and threw the core away. Like a dhoomketu, the tail of a comet, the debris of one life pursues me through birth and rebirth (Shakuntala 4).

Having left the company of Nearchus, Shakuntala reaches Kashi and listens the sacred text of The Puranas:

Know then that, for the born, death is certain, and for the dead, rebirth. The supreme god
Vishnu, protects the universe. By his command, Brahma creates the world; by his order, Shiva destroys it, through Vishnu's will all beings take rebirth, in various wombs, human and animal, good and evil, fit and unfit. Why, you might ask yourself, would Vishnu the lord of creation enter this ceaseless ocean of birth and rebirth? Age after age he becomes a tortoise, a boar, a lion, a dwarf. Why does he abandon the pleasures of Vaikuntha, forsake his heaven to dwell in a womb, hanging head downwards, trapped in a woman's waste and urine, eating and drinking the same, tormented by worms, and scorched by the digestive fire (Shakuntala 183).

To sum up, in Shakuntala: The Play of Memory the novelist raises the question of the equality of woman with man as Shakuntala, the protagonist, has the longing to travel like man but she is helpless and wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She keeps mum about her opinions because she knows that scriptures are forbidden to women.
NOTES & REFERENCES

1Namita Gokhale, Shakuntala: The Play Of Memory (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 2005) 6-7. All the subsequent references are included in the main text.