Chapter VII

MOUNTAIN ECHOES: REMINISCENCES OF

KUMAOINI WOMEN

Through various female characters Namita Gokhale asks people not to misunderstand the definition of feminism. Sushila Singh also remarks, "The word feminism, however, must be understood in its broadest sense as referring to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning could not be restricted to the advocacy of women's rights." As Namita Gokhale is a Kumaoni by birth, she grew up in the lap of mountains. She is fully familiar with the culture, thought and civilization of Kumaoni region and describes this region in the non-fictional work Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women. As a feminist she admires the strength and integrity of a band of extraordinary women, her aunts, grandmothers and friends of grandmothers. She has great admiration for the Kumaoni women, as they are independent in the true sense and maintain their individuality against the awesome conditions. She remarks:

In our mountains women are rarely afraid. They are strong, direct, loyal, and in most situations they are free to speak their minds. You see them roaming the forests for fodder, strong-footed as
goats, fearless as lions. They are not afraid of the dark and they brave and cold, sure-footedly they ford the swift mountain streams and when they are surprised by an attacking tiger, they have been known to raise their scythes and give chase, to save a savaged sister from a man-eating predator.²

Namita Gokhale peeps minutely into the history of these women. According to her, the history of women is in folklore and tradition, in recipes, in faintly-remembered lullabies and the half-forgotten touch of a grand-mother’s hand and cautionary tales about the limits of a woman’s empowerment. Her life reflects the religion, music, festivals and traditions of the region as it is woven into the fabric of the society around her. She calls the Kumaoni women ‘Amazons’ into Purda and plunders their memories with a great purpose. She remarks:

The impulse that drove me, against every constraint of schedule, to give voice to the remembered past of these extraordinary women was a selfish desire to have them live on, in their own words, so that I could thus introduce them and all that they stood for to my children, and their children and the generations to come; to all those exogamous chromosomes for whom the call of the hills, of the Himalayas in
particular, will remain as an insistent genetic memory (Mountain 11).

Namita Gokhale glorifies the unsung heroines of the hills in this book as they have stubborn courage and indomitable will. She feels great respect for these extraordinary women, as they are the symbol of power, integrity and sheer indestructible grit. She remarks:

In my upbringing, in the subliminal code I imbibed from these women, feminity never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but the strength, physical, emotional, moral, of my sex (Mountain 10).

She describes about the fairs, festivals, traditions and the religious life of Kumaon and attempts to reflect the deepest and most intimate convolutions of a culture and society. The lives of these women are full of a never-ending succession of festivals and most of the festivals involve fasts and the preparation of special foods. The folk songs of the hills reflect the true fabric of local Kumaoni life as most of the songs and dramas depict the strong and individualistic mountain-women who are the cultural icons of Kumaon. These women are very hard built and obstinate and follow the traditional life and keep things going. They are always loyal to the family, clan and community. Through the remembered past of four women Namita Gokhale attempts to
show the deepest culture and social transition. These women are Thuldhoti Brahmins who possess a sense of self-dignity. They are brought up in the bewildering web of caste restrictions. They are the witnesses of the sweep of events that encompass the abolition of the Begari system in the hills, Gandhi’s call for independence, freedom at midnight, and India’s subsequent aborted tryst with destiny.

The first woman about whom the book reveals is Gaura Pant who is famous to her readers by her pen name ‘Shivani’. She has always fought against empty rituals and outdated antiquated customs. She has great respect for sanskars and moral values and is troubled to see that mindless westernization will bring no good to society and country as the people are accepting the new culture, the new thoughts and the new society which is totally borrowed from the West. The haste with which the people are abandoning the past heritage troubles her as Namita Gokhale remarks:

I shudder to think of the day, not far away, when even the death of one’s own parents might fail to stir any feelings. As sanskaras are forgotten and abandoned, soon sons will forget to shave their heads as a symbol of their sorrow. I am perturbed by the pervasiveness of the bye-mom and bye-dad culture for ultimately this
may well become our way of sending off the
dead, of forsaking our past (Mountain 31).

It does not mean that she does not want change in society.
But she is in favour of cherishing great values as these are the
foundations of society. She remarks:

Of course, change is a fact of life. It is the law
of nature that which was past can never be
present and what is today cannot be tomorrow.
But the world has not changed for the better,
not at least in our country for which we
cherished such great hopes. People do not
realize how much we have lost out in this
process of change. After all there are some
lasting values which have to withstand the test
of time. Each generation has to analyze them
and then accept them. Nowadays this
perspective do so is somehow lacking (Mountain
31-32).

Like Shivani, Tara Pande is also brought up in the
traditional family that maintains all the appropriate fast and
festivals. She is not sent to school but learns to read and write.
There are many orthodox Brahmin rules and rituals in the family
and all the members were bound to follow many restrictions and
traditions. Namita Gokhale remarks:
There were also taboos and restrictions in every possible direction. For example, women were not allowed to wear any footwear after marriage, no slippers or sandals or shoes. So, when we went out, we avoided the main bazaars and went by the narrow sidelanes and bypaths to visit our relatives, or go to the temple. We wore underskirts and ghagras and two jumpers, one over the other, to keep ourselves warm. We draped two dupattas, using them as shawls, but paradoxically our feet were bare, although they were weighed with enormous silver anklets. But we were used to it; one gets used to anything (Mountain 63).

In spite of her lack of formal education she got victory over all the handicaps with which a girl is born. She wrote numberless stories and articles and has had fifteen of her books published. She also opened a Mahila Shipla Bhawan with her own money and worked hard for the education of the girls. She is very grateful to her husband, as he encouraged her to come forward at every step. She supports values and discipline as Namita Gokhale remarks:

In retrospect I feel that these iron values enriched our lives immeasurably. There were no tensions within, the family, there was only comradeship and a sense of common purpose.
These values were in turn transmitted to my children, through practice and precept, and helped them all to carve successful lives for themselves in the modern world. Respect for my elders, care and compassion for the young or sick or less fortunate—these early values remain the anchor of my life even today (Mountain 73).

Jeeya is a charming matriarch with a glowing skin and a radiant smile. Her father was very modern in outlook for those times and discouraged the women of the house from wasting time in unnecessary family functions. She was sent to the mission school and studied *The Bible* there. She grew up in a liberal atmosphere where the women were respected. She remarks:

The sagacity of elder women was respected by the men and their advice sought in all matters. I only realized the difference in cultures when I got married and went to the plains, where purdah and the ill-treatment of women and girl-children were prevalent (Mountain 98).

When she went to Garhwal with her husband, she noticed a difference. Her husband wanted to start a school for girls but the local people opposed it. She had great belief in Swarajya and nationalistic ideas, while her husband was neutral. He was always liberal towards her view. She gives full description of the cultures, tradition and many temples of the Kumaon region. She
does not like the degradation of moral values due to their
timelessness and trains the people to live a sublime life. Her
memory and visual recall of all the details of her life is quite
remarkable.

Shakuntala Pande has been an eye-witness to the evolving
political life of her country. She is sad as present politics is
lacking a spirit of sacrifice and dedication that was found in the
past. To her, the independence movement helped a lot to the high
caste women of Kumaon as several meaningless and orthodox
rituals were forsaken and women got freedom from the
oppression of women. Now conventions were breaking down and
women found their new freedom and moved as freely as men
interacting on the same level.

These women help the readers to form an opinion about
the Kumaoni women who are no longer prepared to remain
puppets in the hands of men and Nature.

Thus, Namita Gokhale is a devotee of Lord Shiva. She has
seen many Shiva temples as she accepts the divine powers of this
Yogi. Lord Shiva is worshipped in countless temples with
different names. Many followers of Lord Vishnu and Lord
Brahma are afraid of Him. Secondly, Shiva’s followers go to the
temples of Somnath, Mallikarjuna, Mahakaleshwar, Omkareshwar,
Kedarnath, Banaras, Triyambakeshwar, Vaidyanath, Naganath,
Rameshwaram, Girishneshwara etc. where Jyotirlingas have been
established by his devotees. Thirdly, there is a distinct culture
of the places where Lord Shiva is worshipped. Fourthly, most of
the Jains accept the divine powers of Lord Shiva and pronounce
‘Om Namah Shivaya’ with due respect. Only the selfish pandits
create enmity between the Jains and other followers of Lord
Shiva. Fifthly, one can be conscious of one’s energy (Kundalini)
if one is a devotee of Lord Shiva. Sixthly, very few scholars can
explain the five primary principles of Shiva Tattva known as the
essence of Shiva, the feminine power principle, the eternal
goods, Shiva as Lord and true knowledge. Shrikant’sha’s
commentary on Vedant Sutras is admirable. Roberto Calasso and
other thinkers aptly believe that people breathe new life when
they have faith in Shiva.

To sum up, In her Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of
Kumaoni Women, Mrs. Gokhale extols the Kumaoni women as
they are independent against the awesome conditions. Namita
Gokhale herself is a Kumaoni by birth as she grew up in the lap
of mountains, where she is fully familiar with culture, thought
and civilization of Kumaoni territory.
NOTES & REFERENCES


2Namita Gokhale, Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women (New Delhi: Roli Books Ltd., 1998) 10. All the subsequent references are included in the main text.
Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

The study conducted in the foregoing pages leads us to certain conclusions as regards to Namita Gokhale's status as a feminist in the realm of Indian female writings. On the basis of the study of her works including *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, *God, Graves and Grandmother*, *A Himalayan Love Story*, *The Book of Shadows*, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, and *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*, Namita Gokhale has been aptly put in the category of feminist writers of India like Bharati Mukherjee, Taslima Nasreen, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Dina Mehta, etc. As a journalist she understands the social, political and economic conditions of the contemporary women. As a feminist she does not transport herself to the world of imagination as she knows how to face the realities of life. Her characters are not prepared to remain the victims of sexual harassment, professional rivalry, educational backwardness, rigidity, orthodoxy, cultural degradation, political degeneration, etc. Quite a large number of her female protagonists raise their voice against male-domination, foolish conventions, political restrictions and cultural backwardness. As she has a lot of bitter experiences, she knows how to survive in this male-dominated world.
As a feminist she is not prepared to be a part of the lost generation. She does not want to limit herself to five or six families in a country village and write about family visits, picnics, shopping expeditions, ball-dances, etc. Her first novel Paro: Dreams Of Passion confirms that she deserves a place with Virginia Woolf for her feminist interests. Like the advocates of feminism, she analyzes the inner working of minds of Paro, Priya, B.R., Bucky Bhandpur, Lenin, Shambhu Nath Mishra, Loukas, Suresh, etc. Priya constantly observes Paro and even writes a diary on her life. She admits her relations with B.R., the reputed businessman of Sita Sewing Machine. Even Paro recollects her childhood when she was seduced by art master Marcus in the boarding school in the hills. Yet Paro loved every moment of it. As Paro needs sex regularly, she is never ashamed of her sexuality. To her, physical beauty and sexuality are the two weapons to earn money, which shows the pathetic condition of females in the world.

A feminist study of the novel reveals the fact that Paro is nymphomaniac who runs from man to man to seek support and satisfaction. Namita Gokhale’s Priya as well as B.R. recollect their past like Paro. But all these characters do not plan their future as they live only in the present. Namita Gokhale analyzes external personality as well as inner hearts and minds of her characters and succeeds to a great extent.
Paro: Dreams of Passion, a highly flavoured odyssey of the passions and jealousies of a group of a middle-class Indian women, especially, of the experiences of the narrator Priya and those of her friend Paro, visualizes the world of modern women in metropolitan towns. Hence this novel is a work of fiction which invites us to see Gokhale’s feminist facets. God, Graves and Grandmother presents before us a whore’s daughter named Gudiya, who sees a beautiful dream of a bright and colourful future while encountering the economic and social vicissitudes. The novel seems to say that woman should be economically self-dependent.

A Himalayan Love Story delineates Parvati – the central character – who depicts herself as a person surrounded with isolation, vacuum, anger and restlessness. 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. In her Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women, Mrs. Gokhale extols the Kumaoni women as they are independent against the awesome conditions. Namita Gokhale herself is a Kumaoni by birth as she grew up in the lap of mountains, where she is fully familiar with culture, thought and civilization of Kumaoni territory.
In so many seminars the research scholars have described her concept of woman and called her a feminist. In the Preface to her book *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis* Sushila Singh refers to two terms like men in feminism and feminism without women. She refers to the remark of Simone de Beauvoir who asked – Are there women really? Similarly Adrienne Rich said – Let me hold and tell you. There is a lot of controversy regarding gender and scholars have given a lot of theories on feminism. Inspite of a lot of theories, discussions on feminist ideology continue, and the feminist movement continues even today. The whole perception of life and literature has changed due to feminists. As a literary artist, Namita Gokhale is very well acquainted with the feminist ideology, feminist literary theory, feminist literary criticism and women. Thought is present in her novels and the question of identity has been analyzed by her. Inspite of a lot of definitions and remarks by female scholars, the concept of male culture continues.

Women are themselves divided on the question of women’s liberation. American women feel that they are liberated after 1920. The Indian women do not know what the sociologists are saying in the seminars regarding them and their rights. Most of them happen to be the victims of social pressures, rigid traditions, male domination and yet continue to survive. They don’t depend much upon their defenders and advocates. Of course, some reforms have been suggested by
some politicians and social-reformers like Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Nehru, Dayanand Saraswati etc. and a class of educated women has emerged in the big cities. Some domestic ladies are also conscious of their rights. Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill etc. raised their voice against the oppression and the subordinate condition of women. Like Lockwood Carden, Namita Gokhale is conscious of the women liberation movement. But through Paro and Priya, she asks people not to misunderstand the definition of feminism.

Like the members of National Organization for Women, she wants to create a new society for the betterment of women. She wants that women should have a right to say what they have to say in their own lives. Social conditions and rigid rules should not check the growth of their intellectual powers. She does not want that women remain crippled in new society and do not get the reward of their work. Let men accept their mental and spiritual powers.

To sum up, in lieu of showing her female protagonists involving in sexuality, Namita Gokhale presents their pathetic circumstances due to which they have to remain under the heels of men. Directly or indirectly, Gokhale seems to raise her voice against female oppression through her protagonists like Paro in Paro: Dreams of Passion; Gudiya in God, Graves and Grandmother; Parvati in A Himalayan Love Story; Richita Tiwari in The Book of Shadows; Shakuntala in Shakuntala: The
Play of Memory; and Kumaoni women — Gaura alias Shivani, Tara Pande, Jeeya, Shakuntala Pandey — in Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women.