Chapter II

NAMITA GOKHALE:
SUBVERTING THE HEGEMONY
Namita Gokhale is recognized as one of those Indian English novelists who have exploited the best of their creative talents to fictionally put on record their dissent on and dissatisfaction with the plights and precarious conditions a woman, particularly Indian woman, is mercilessly placed in. Her fiction is replete with the woman characters whose dreams are shattered; whose rosy and romantic notions of life are fragmented; whose marriages are a continual spring source of torments and tragedies. The patriarchal society keeps planning, aligning and realigning cultural systems to add fuel to the fire of their exploitation and oppression. They (women characters) are, invariably, middle class housewives with absolute dependence and very meager amount of choices and alternatives available to them. The alternatives left to them, ironically are highly deceptive and extremely limited. Exercising one choice they stigmatically fall into another trap of dependence and subjugation.

Namita Gokhale expresses her dissatisfaction regarding the issues of marginalization and victimization of women. Her fiction indicates her strong creative stance to empower women. It has been observed that 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. The 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.
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.

Namita Gokhale’s first novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* centers round the lives of two women characters, Paro and Priya. Both these women make an attempt to shake off the shackles of social conventions. But it is only Paro who actually sets herself free from the shackles. Though Priya also tries to liberate herself from the middle class moral and mental make-up, she cannot, however, reach the same level of emancipation as Paro does. Both the women use the same technique – manipulating the opposite sex to achieve their ends.

*Paro: Dreams of Passion* can be considered as the writer’s expression of a rebellious inclination to reject culturally imposed sexual expression. Gokhale attempts to show this societal stance, as a facade which actually belies the fact of sexual indulgence amongst the jet-set or the highly westernized urban Indian. On the other hand, the novel can also be regarded as a working class girl’s ambition to liberate her from the tardy shoddy and tedious middle class suburban existence.

In a society which systematically throttles a woman’s possibilities Priya’s chronicle underlines the constructing dilemmas of traditional options available within the institution of marriage. On
the other hand Paro’s drastic step of committing suicide illustrates the futility of revolutionary bohemian protests in a society which has always tacitly supported campaigns to eliminate women who transgress the predefined limits of social conformism.

Rejecting the masculine dialect and masculine perception of relationships and happiness Namita Gokhale presents here as the complex gamut of the feminine search for identity against the backdrop of contemporary educated Indian society in a palpable manner. She successfully touches upon the specific feminist search for meaningful and liberated identity.

Paro explains the subversive role of tradition in perpetuating the secondary or supportive role of women and the need of discrediting its legacies if women have to emerge as emancipated beings. The novel is presented as a confessional account of the narrator’s own experiences and those of her friends. It is a kind of ‘vindication’ of what they had seen, heard and felt. It is a sort of confessional diary. Priya, the narrator in the novel leads a surrogate life. She tries to find fulfillment by adopting the Aristotelian morality of the golden mean, the well beaten path of mediocre. She marries a person without love, yet secretly admires and cherishes Paro’s unbridled buoyant eccentricity. Priya constantly redefines her existence, her hopes and aspirations, her dreams, her agonies and despairs, her fashions and mannerisms in the context of her relationship with Paro. Their lives are intertwined and Priya is
unable to face “a world without her”. She cannot understand the response which Paro generates among men:

I mean, I always did my duty and worried about other people’s feeling, and never got a’ thank you’ in return, everybody just took me even more for granted than ever before. And here she was twisting everybody around her little finger.
It was emotional blackmail, I said.¹

Priya never forgives Paro for marrying BR, the man whom she had idolized and defied in her fancies.

Paro indulges in whimsical social extremes. Even during intimate moments, she is capable of dramatizing her experiences to gain a point. A child of middle aged parents, who is rather a bother in their well-ordered lives. Thus the daughter of a retired Brigadier, she grew in a due course into a so “exotic a creature” endowed with ravishing sensual looks. She spends her childhood in the hostel of a remote public school. She is sexually abused by a school teacher, while in her teens and this experience leaves an indelible scar on her psyche. In every encounter with a new male she lets herself go for a conquest and relentlessly uses the tactical advantage of her sex to obtain a victory which often proves to be pyrrhic. Priya is shattered by this attitude and resignedly watches the phenomena of having every male in her life “in eternal bondage to Paro.” Paro has intuitively realized the truth which many women are able to only after a consummate lifelong struggle that women confined by her
roles of mother, wife, sweet-heart, daughter, sister which have been codified by men; has no weapon other than her sex. Paro did not perceive any shame or furtiveness about it. It is through this weapon of sex that she wants to overcome her marginality.

In her attempt to find her own selfhood, she sets about mutilating, and dominating men whom she encounters, denying them their truths and values and destroying their superiority. However, even an uninhibited Paro finds it impossible to nullify the social conditioning and is haunted by the contradictions with generations of mental economic and emotional slavery have fixed in the feminine psyche. Even she is not able to take on the world as a sovereign arbiter of her own destiny. She is touchy, malicious, having a knock for destruction and enhancing a man by means of the desire she arouses in him. Yet paradoxically she wants a defined man too, who could enchain her and glorify her emotional surrender. She wants to possess such a man completely and be possessed by him. Girls are nurtured on the myth of the savior hero. The society cherishes the myth that a man can realize her true worth and happiness only if she finds appreciation by a man. All women are trained systematically to seek the justification of their existence in men. Paro is the product of this social indoctrination. Her live-in relationship with Bucky Bhandpur, is an assertion of her individual independence, her romantic affection for Lenin is a conquest for her attention seeking and emotionstarved self, but her servile infatuation with Shambhu
Nath Mishra has to be considered as a loud testimony to the psychological bondage of women. Even Priya who could expect basi motives and most deplorable doings from Paro is taken aback by this behavior:

The whole thing puzzled me. I could not understand the situation. I could well ascribe the worst possible motives to her and suspect her of having a liaison with such an influential figure for all the implicit gains she could derive from her position as his mistress. What left me totally stunned was her absolute and unconditional surrender.²

Paro’s emotional surrender though receives the typical masculine response; Mishra, nevertheless, gets tired of “such smothering devotion” and “wants to get rid of her.” Paro attempts to continue this insane romance telephoning him incessantly, trying always to sidetrack the phalanx of secretaries and officials surrounding him “trying constantly to be with him.” She stoically undergoes the humiliation of begging and cringing even of being beaten by Mrs. Shambhu Nath Mishra. However her indomitable spirit enables her to overcome this tragedy and makes her to lead a life which is free of Mishra’s ghost. Paro lives with Lenin flirts with Suresh and marries Leoros, the gay film director, has an accident, is saved and then commits suicide. She had attained almost a celebrity status and was looked up to as a prototype of a liberated woman. But her ultimate rejection of the viable option to live raises
several doubts about the authenticity of her public image, and makes her flights from one extreme to the other less genuine. Paro slashed her wrists with a fruit knife when everybody else was on a high during a party. Priya could read an immense dejection on her face as if she had realized the futility of her struggle:

I can see her staring moodily out of the panes which had misted in the winter cold. It was raining softly outside, and the cars on the street were wet flurry streaky of light. I think I saw tears in her eyes. Her hair tumbled over her face. She sat hunched up, stony faced, yet somehow more defenseless than I had ever seen her.

Paro’s unsettled life can be interpreted as an impatient and poignant protest of a woman who was terribly alone and did not want to pilfer her identity in a man-made world, a woman in whose behavior the luminous screen of nonconformist gestures had shielded an inner vacuum which she could not fill up despite innumerous relationships, a women who ended up jeopardizing her life itself in the process.

Paro is, however, the product of her circumstances. Her only fault is that like any average person she fails to rise on the occasion and succumbs and the impact of factors is beyond her control. But we can hardly expect a heroic courage from persons like Paro.

Paro knows that her beauty and sexual potential are true assets for her. Namita Gokhale emphasises the fact that women are imposed to look 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.  

Paro’s unconventionality and the discussions of her marginality can be revealed through the following quotes:

Paro fits into the mould of a pretty woman seized by what Jung calls animals and that is why she is headstrong and her opinions have the character of solid convictions.

We can understand Paro as unconventional bride through Priya’s reflective viewpoint:

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

The above lines criticise the conventional notions of womanhood which is perpetually used to exploit women. Paro’s foil Priya presents a different aspect of a woman’s journey to explore her identity against the conscriptions of marginalization. Priya, a middle class girl, is carried away by the charm and sophistication of BR and idolizes him even after her marriage. She is insecure and uncertain as she drives her worth from a capricious approval of her lover. There
is desperation in her attempts to bedeck herself for BR. Her insecurity has been rooted in her mother’s attitude towards her. Her widowed mother considers her as the bread winner and expects that she should shoulder the responsibility of her brother to stand on his own as a doctor. Her mother also wishes that Priya should get married to a deaf and mute person as they can’t pay the dowry. Priya is shattered by the alliance and is left with merely the memories of the intimate moments shared by her and BR. Like many other girls, Priya opts for arranged marriage as it is the only institution which can provide a semblance of socio economic and emotional security to a mediocre woman within the constraints of traditional society. A woman is constantly threatened by the impasse. She is tactfully placed in by the intriguing dominant patriarchal culture. Even the choice of marriage, whether to enter it, or, opt out of it, or, even to go as though – it is highly deceptive or prescriptive. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly commented:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married or have been or plan to be or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious or even indifferent in regard to that institution.  

Such marriages of convenience include manipulation and strategies for the creation and perpetuation of a superficially secure atmosphere at home. Priya too despite her infatuation with BR, is careful
to keep her marriage intact. She seldom displays her real self to her husband and is watchful to convey the image of an ideal wife, ideal cook, ideal housekeeper and ideal host. But marriage fails to provide her the desired happiness. Her life has become monotonous. The diary she starts to write about “passion, boredom, vanity and jealousy” provides an escape route to her. It is her confession as well as her catharsis. Women are always denied the right of expression in every culture. At the end she comes back to her husband and marriage as other options are closed for her. Her marriage has given drab routine to her waiting, monotony and disappointment.

Paro presents the obsessive passion of women to lead a life of their own choice. Unfortunately for women the society has already outlined and defined these choices. Paro and Priya struggle and make compromise to assert their choices but are unable to execute them effectively. Thus, the novel reveals the marginalization of women in patriarchal society.

In order to realize their ultimate goal of liberated selfhood, women often employ strategies to overcome their insecurities, fears and use sex as their weapon, yet, they find it impossible to defy the traditional conditioning and constraint:

To prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebelliously to create a world other than that in
which she fails to attain her being, she must resort to self-expression.\textsuperscript{8}

Priya’s diary and voyeurism and Paro’s flouncing jerky mannerisms are the expressions of thwarted creativity:

A woman determined in spite of her condition to go on living in a clear sighted and genuine manner may have no other resort than a stoic pride. Being in every way dependent, she can only know an inner abstract freedom, she refuses to accept readymade principles and values. She uses her judgment. She questions and thus she escapes conjugal slavery, but her aloofness, her fidelity to the rule, ‘Bear and abstain” constitute but a negative attitude.\textsuperscript{9}

Consumed by the sterility of her rebellion and emotional solitude Paro denies a fulfilling life to herself and destroys her own life. Immobilized, in renunciation and cynicism, Priya is not able to assert her will positively and suffers from finding no real purpose in her life.

Namita Gokhale’s juxtaposition of both these women presents the two dimensions of a single person. Both Paro and Priya represent the marginalised women of eighties, who dared to go against the established conventions of matrimony and motherhood. Gokhale also has criticized the institution of marriage for the marginalization of women. In Indian context marriage is the most significant event in a woman’s life. But with times the ideal institution got subverted into a convenient contract for promise cutting and fidelity. The novel is also a critique on sex as a
means of fulfillment in 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. Thus Gokhale has given an account of women’s mundane and unacknowledged yearnings as well as their grit and determination to survive against hardships.

The novel also has satirical potential that uses sex as a message signaling frustration with patriarchal discourse without seeming victimized. Paro’s and Priya’s indulgence in sex with different partners suggest a metaphorical reversal of roles in an attempt to topsyturvy the gendering of the conventional fictions and inverts the patriarchal value systems.

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 society. The erotic aspect and the economic are entwined to draw attention to the gender prescription and marginalization of women. In Paro the preoccupation with sexuality represents a carnivalesque upheaval in which the body reigns supreme.

Mild, submissive, domesticated, unprotesting, self-sacrificing woman was an essential adornment of the patriarchal social set up. The world over clever manipulation of the inequitable relations by the males kept the stereotypical position of woman intact. Looking
sweet, charming and attractive, to make herself a desirable “object” of the “subject” (the male) was regarded the well-defined orbit of woman and she went about it without the least consciousness of her occupying the marginal space in the sexual politics – a game which the male almost always played to his decisive advantage. Child bearing, child rearing and keeping the house in order for the husband – master were unquestionable tasks the woman had to perform to the husband’s satisfaction and delight. Failure in these areas evoked censure, even rejection.

Barrenness (especially in the Indian context) for woman, for instance, was regarded as the greatest curse. Infertility was considered inauspicious and the barren woman had to bear the censorship of her immediate family and face social contempt and ostracization from auspicious functions in the society at large. Deviance in child rearing was frowned upon. The woman had to be on her toes, even if she found it physically hard at times due to over exertion. Even today, in the Indian social milieu, in the lower stratum of society, woman is accustomed to the frequent or occasional beatings she receives and the money she earns by manual slogging being snatched, by her drunkard, good for nothing husband.

But with the tide of feminism which rose assertively in 60s emerged the new woman radically different from her traditional counterpart. She is conscious, resourceful, confident, dynamic at times
even aggressive, busy redefining herself, acquiring a new identity and
dealing with the world around on her own terms.

Namita Gokhale’s second novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994) depicts different shades of the feminine sensibility. At the same
time the novel convincingly talks about the most powerful instinct in
woman, which is the survival instinct. The novel brings to our notice the
pathetic fact about prostitutes and their children.

The novel is dominated by women characters, giving
subordinate status to men. The women in the novel are portrayed as
the new women, who are ready to inverse their roles defined by the
conventions. Gokhale has tried to illustrate how a woman can use her
skills to create a space for her existence. She has shown two ways to
empower her women. One is through female bonding and another is
by using her sexuality. The story is narrated by Gudiya about her
illustrious, fearless, creative and dominant grandmother whom she
calls Ammi who is the true representative of new woman. Ammi
belonged to the family of courtesans, once wealthy with a house of
130 rooms and 22 servants. Gudiya speaks of her grandmother and
their glorious past with nostalgic impasse:

My grandmother had been a great singer, a
Kothewali, whose voice more liquid and
beautiful that Lata Mangeshkar’s eleven nawabs
and two Englishmen were besotted with her
carriages, baggies, Rolls Royce’s and Daimlers
used to line up outside the house in the evening.\textsuperscript{10}

The novel is an attempt to defy the conventional image of woman and simultaneously the patriarchal constructs of gender and to project the image of the new woman. Namita Gokhale has painted colorful women who challenge the generic roles—being submissive and unresisting, self-sacrificing and domesticated. The women in the novel challenge the politics of sex and successfully serve the subject object gamut. The women in this novel are the manifestation 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.\textsuperscript{11}

The novel is an example of the assertion and courage of women to exist in a hostile world, which, at every step, tries to smother the identity of women. Gudiya and her grandmother have reduced from riches to rags. They are thrown out of the house and have now come to reside in a jhuggi near a construction site. They do not have any means of livelihood, but Ammi being a woman with a positive frame of mind builds a make shift temple under the peepal
tree behind their Jhuggi. Although Ammi is a Muslim yet she takes up the role of a Priestess of the temple and utilizes the proceedings from the temple for their livelihood. As she belonged to a family of singing prostitutes she uses her sweet melodious voice in singing bhajans, enthralling the audience and turning them into committed bhaktas, who do not grudge the amount while making their offerings. The number of devotees gradually increased and so also the proceeds of the temple. Gradually she becomes the power center of the temple and controls the management with iron hand:

In spite of her distraction, grandmother administered the temple with an iron hand. Everything had to be perfect. The premises were kept scrupulously clean and all the devotees who constituted the ‘inner circle’ the little hand on believers who had surrendered themselves to Ammi’s wisdom, had specific chores assigned to them. There was somebody to sweep the ‘courtyard’ to polish the brass and silver, tend flowers, mind the chappals, count the change, keep track of the holy days, distribute the prasadam and attend to all the other seemingly unimportant details that constitute the daily life of the temple. 12

Thus, Ammi has deviated from the traditional norm that men should earn and women should look after the household submissively. Ammi is bold and fearless as she is not cowed by Sundar Pahelwan who is the Dada of the area. In return of giving protection to people of that area he would extract ‘hafta’ from them,
but Ammi by her natural gifts tames him. Gudiya opines, “My grandmother had well acquired knowledge of how to handle men”.  

In the usual ‘honeyed voice’ Ammi tells Sundar Pahalwan:

> Seize out money Pahalwanji but spare our self-respect. I am the widow of a Brahmin, my husband was a priest. Guard your tongue or else virtuous woman’s curses may follow you.  

The Pahalwan is further called on the following week and take his ‘cash’. When he comes on Monday, Sundar Pahalwan is surprised to find Ammi singing a bhajan in front of a statue of Durga, astride a tiger under a ‘glittering canopy’ with a hand of worshippers assembled around the shrine. The result is that Sundar Pahalwan is completely overpowered and he does not leave the shrine before living eleven rupees in the Thali.

Similarly when the man from the municipal corporation comes with the demolition order for the ‘pucca cement structure’, which now is the house of Ammi and Gudiya, falls at Ammi’s feet and begs her forgiveness for the blasphemy. She is practical and therefore could face the troubles that dog her and her granddaughter’s life with determination. Ammi’s character is best summed up by Gudiya who says, “She was not the one to shed tears. And she never wasted her time in anger”.  

There is a business like practicality about the old woman which makes her to come to grips with insurmountable troubles that dog her
and her granddaughter’s life. Ammi is presented to us not only as a person who makes a success of her life in a highly competitive world, but also she is shown reaching spiritual mystic heights which few women are known to have attained in or outside the literature. By carving out female personality along these lines the writer seeks to demonstrate that the female potential both for corporeal and the spiritual world is no less than that of a male, and as such there is no reason for women to indulge in self-pity when confronted by crises nor do they need to seek the pity of their male counterparts.

Shambhu – Phoolwati relationship further confirms the New Woman Image Gokhale appears to be formulating in her novel. Phoolwati’s act of kicking Shambu when he got drunk and tried to beat her makes a reversal of the patriarchal norms of wife beating. Shambhu’s murder does not evoke the traditional wailing from Phoolwati who is aware of his ravish character and who instead of mourning his death (which would have been the case if the stereotype wife had been presented) rejoices at his murder and wishes to reward the murderer. She also displays admirable courage, imagination and entrepreneurial skills in sizing up the situations, diversifying her business and increasing her earnings. She exhibits her business knacks by negotiating a reduced five year rental from the street lord Sundar Pahalwan. She also diversifies her business and sets up a stall just outside the temple and sold incense and marigold garlands and coconuts
and little brass amulets. She also prints colored post cards of Ammi and keeps them on her stall for sale.

Poolwati’s association with Ammi, her say in the matters of the temple and her quick early responses is not only seizing the opportunities but also creating them, undoubtly establish her capability as a courageous, practical and foresighted individual, with a healthy practical perspective on life which enables her to survive, prosper and carve a niche in the new surroundings into which she was thrown on account of Shambhu’s sudden death. A measure of her grief may be witnessed in the manner in which she deals with Sundar Pahelwan, who somehow tends to lose his aggressive mood, when he is in her company.

Gradually, she arouses admiration for herself in Sundar Pahelwan which culminates into proposal of marriage which is not at all conventional. She proposes certain conditions before accepting the proposal of marriage which were -firstly to build a pucca house for her whose ownership would be hers, secondly she would continue her work and thirdly Gudiya would be treated as their adoptive daughter. This indicates that she is aware of her wellbeing and wants secured future and also is aware of her responsibilities towards Gudiya.

Phoolwati and Sundar’s marriage is not the conventional one in which male oppression is the norm. Phoolwati’s volatile personality successfully keeps Sunder Pahelwan reigned in. His generous affection for her – he does not grudge her any expense and she often goes on
extravagant buying sarees, spending large amounts of money – and his cheerful willingness to do her bidding demonstrate the type of equation that exists between them. The message here is loud and clear: If the woman desires she can shuffle the parameters of marriage she can effectively put an end to the marital victimization and oppression. She needs not follow the dictates of Manu, subjugating herself to her lord and master. Her identity and she can be kept intact. Phoolwati is not daunted one bit either by sex or by class superiority; she deals with Madam Roxanne and her husband Mr. Lamba (far wealthier couple than she is) on an equal footing, without being conscious of her humble economic and social status.

Gudiya-Kalki relationship marks a radical break with the usual man-woman relationship. She modifies the model in which man as the ‘subject’ seeks woman, the ‘objet’ or the ‘other’. The author creates a situation in which the woman gets attracted towards the Prince of her dreams and begins to desire him. Gudiya is made the ‘subject’ and he the ‘object’ or the ‘other’. This conspicuous reversal of the polar positions between woman and man forms part of the conscious attempt on the part of women writers to displace the male from the unquestionable dominant position he has occupied by virtue of the male supremacy established by the patriarchal system in which a woman is considered ‘forward’ or lacking in womanly grace, if she desires a male, as a male does a female. This makes the novel a strong testament of feminism which inter-alia stresses positioning of woman as the subject.
Through Gudiya’s calculated attempts to acquire a new name and thereby a new identity, the novelist makes it explicit that women need to redefine themselves. Gudiya does not like her name which somehow seems to believe her personality and render her insignificance. So, she changes her name as Pooja Abhimanyu Singh, a royal sounding name which would lift her in the social hierarchy and invest her with a self who commands importance. This acquiring of new identity brings out a perceptible change in her making her more confident, poised and graceful. She carries herself with dignity and grace while dealing with the Mercenary Mr. Lamba and Cyrus (Roxanne’s nephew) in the matter of the will left by Roxanne. Gudiya supports Kalki in fulfilling his dream of becoming a famous star by giving him her ornaments so that he can go to Bombay to fulfill his dreams. But he is lost and the novelist does not tell us about what happened to him later on. In spite of losing Kalki, Gudiya remains composed Kalki is recognized as the husband of Gudiya, the granddaughter of famous spiritual Saint Grandmother. After Kalki’s disappearance Gudiya joins Phoolwati and they carry on with life.

Gudiya does not disintegrate at Kalki’s disappearance nor does Phoolwati became a helpless wreck after Sundar Pahalwan’s murder; she remains in control of affairs and her life exhibiting in no worry that she cannot do without male support. This is however, not to say that she does not feel grief stricken to lose her second husband, Sundar whom she had come to love for his qualities. Often she feels
sad and has developed the tendency of crying whenever the memory of Sundar peeps. But she has the capacity to carry on, she continues to manage things. This is what matters. Ammi, Phoolwati and Gudiya seem to fulfill the matriarchal utopian vision which aims to see women as powerful individuals with command over their bodies and lives.

The quiet, mild Lila who becomes a devoted follower of the spiritual grandmother is endowed with a better defined identity than her son. Lila displays a determined self in her unflinching commitment to her spiritual Guru and goes to the extent of flinging the jewelry she is wearing into grandmother’s grave much to the Chagrin and anger of her son and daughter-in-law who lose interest in her after she is without her gold. She too, like the Grandmother, acquires a spiritual aura after she comes back from her long pilgrimage from which she was not expected to return alive in view of her old age and peril health.

Thus, we can notice that Gokhale depicts 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 the life with all its ups and downs. They are sharply etched out in terms of their self and identity. They are cast in the mold of the New Women who solves her problems herself and is assertive, practical and resilient.
The analysis of two more relationships further confirms that the novelist has projected the image of the “New Woman” in her novel. In the relationship of Mrs. Roxanne and Mr. Lamba, Mrs. Roxanne is rich, important and powerful whereas Mr. Lamba is her shadow who gets his substance from her. He has married Roxanne, a rich Parsi woman and gained status in the society and luxuries in life, while Roxanne is shown to be busy doing something meaningful and socially constructive. She is serving the cause of education and doing social work by being the Principal of St. Jude’s School for the socially handicapped. Mr. Lamba is only an appendage who is enjoying good life because of his wealthy wife.

Phoolwati’s reaction to the death of both the men in her life is quite unlike the behavior 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’. 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 is and tries to relate her complexion and feature 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 affairs with the harmonium player and her defeat in the law suit 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 agonizing 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 court room. The two women wrestled and grappled on the floor. There was none 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 hair glistening skull more embarrassingly naked and scrolled than the sad accusations against her. We lost the case and everything we had.  

This can be looked upon as a critique of the society that forgives men and blames women. Men visit prostitutes and fulfill their desires, they promise them love and security but ultimately the
fear of society makes them detach prostitutes. The harmonium player decamps with Gudiya’s mother’s jewelry and other luggage and mercilessly abandons her. Thus the novel provokes thinking on issues of prostitution and the hypocrisy of men.

The period of attaining puberty is one of the important milestones in the life of every girl and for Gudiya it is something mysterious. She is ignorant about that aspect of 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 movement. Phoolwati explains Gudiya that it was a period when a girl became a women 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 becomes a burden on attaining puberty is the most sad and touching reality for a girl attaining womanhood.

Gudiya states that there had not been any ‘model of masculinity’, since childhood for teaching her lessons of dependence as a woman. 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. There is a time when Gudiya feels lonely and lost but it is not because of a man she feels lonely and dejected after her grandmother’s death.
Thus, 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 male dominated world. Namita Gokhale’s characters take a revolutionary turn in subverting the politics of gender. She highlighted the rights of earning women and asserts that women have the ability to take decisions related to money and property. By bringing Gudiya to her house Roxanne exhibits the feminine grit, authenticity and power that have been subdued through ages of suppression, dominance and patriarchal authority.

*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* does defy the traditional patriarchal system and authority by creating ‘a brave women’s world. All women play a very significant role in unveiling the hidden facade 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 rapture 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.
Namita Gokhale’s third novel *A Himalayan Love Story* is a love story of the central protagonist Parvati. It is also an engaging record of the tragic story of her marginalization throughout her life. Parvati, a Kumaon girl desires to seek love and support in her life which leads her ultimately to insanity. The Kumaon hills form perfect backdrops for Parvati, as beautiful fragile and strong as a wild flower, which grows without any care on the hillside. She lives in dignified poverty with her mother whose moods change like the sky above the hills. Parvati though shy and retiring has a fiery soul within. Her eyes forever down cast and fearful reveal nothing, yet her heart is full of longing for the unknown and unexplored. She walks through life, holding on to her dreams, savoring them in secret.

Her spirit refuses to be held captive and rocking free beyond the mountains. As a young girl, Parvati is sensitive and thoughtful and learns to cope with the darkness that envelops her world suddenly without warning. The novel powerfully evokes the feminine force. All the activities are controlled in a sense by the primordial famine force. And desire, passion, love and fulfillment are elemental to the feminine. The novel begins on a very negative note. As 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. 18
Parvati lives with her mother in Jeolikote, a tourist halt on the way to Nainital. She lost her father and had been brought up by her illiterate, poor, lonely mother. She has been the witness of her mother’s loneliness and poverty. Her mother tries to cope with her sexual and economic demands and ultimately a sense of security by indulging in an extramarital affair with her tenant, a grocer.

Being illiterate and poor, Parvati’s mother considers Parvati’s education as wastage of money for the only reason that Parvati is 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, and then you could earn and provide for me in my old age. But all you are going to do is get married to someone 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.\(^\text{19}\)

Gokhale has criticized the marginalized status and unequal treatment given to daughters in the patriarchal society. The Indian society is plagued by such people who deny girls their basic rights. Parvati’s mother curses herself for being 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 Shrikrishanaji, their tenant and grocer consuming liquor she says, “My world was
shattered. People were not as they appeared. There was another life behind their masks”.

Parvati assures herself that the woman she had seen in Shrikrishnaji’s arms was not her mother but a wraith. She continues to spy her mother and witnesses her mother’s sacrilegious act. She believes that her mother was possessed by spirits and keeps her mother’s pious image intact. Her mother dies due to tuberculosis. After her mother’s death her step uncle Hiranandji takes care of her. He is the headmaster of well-known school in Nainital and also a bachelor. Masterji, her uncle admits her in a girl’s school wherefrom her new journey begins which is a journey of a girl to a woman. She manages the household affairs with ease and gives its credit to her poor economic condition. She also enjoys the ‘special attention’ received 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”.

Parvati’s second phase of life thus begins with attention and adoration of men. She gets occupied with her physical self. She tries to color her lips and augments 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 experiences first sexual encounter with Salman. Parvati is well aware of the religious disparities, yet she is convinced about her relationship.

The affair between Salman and Paravati 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. Thus, he is only a womanizer. Parvati stoically accepts the whole thing, ‘I had known in our very first meeting that he was only a shadow’. 22

The affair can be looked upon as Parvati’s confidence and grit to gratify her desires. 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 hunting her, ‘Salman had not considered me important enough to stay on for, he had not even bothered to bid me goodbye’. 23

At the age of 20 Parvati is informed by Masterji that he had chosen a boy for her to get married. This statement reveals the reality of the institution of marriage. A girl is merely informed about the
most important event in her life. She is not consulted or given a chance either.

The third stage in Parvati’s life is after her marriage which covers the major part of her life. She struggles for her existence as a woman in the role of wife. As a daughter in law she 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 compatibility. Parvati likes Mukul than Lalit. But she cannot express her linking as she is born and brought up in an orthodox culture where patriarchal social conventions are rigidly followed. That’s why she has to marry Lalit who belongs to the same caste as hers. She and her husband 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 sweet sat upon his body. It rose like a miasma from his cloths 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.24

These lines speak volumes about many such women who have to come to terms with the life after marriage. She lives in a joint family, which provided 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.” Even after a year of marriage Parvati and Lalit do not shared the bed. And the contradiction is that “their family expects ‘good news’ from Parvati’s neglected womb.” Parvati is physically assaulted and abused. She always optimistically wishes that her relationship will blossom and she would be able to lead a normal life:

My silence, my calm, as I sleepwalked through this unexpected role, was constructed by our happy group as praiseworthy reticence normal to the Indian women; it aroused no questions or comments. 25

Gradually with time the relationship between Parvati and her husband is dead and they communicate only for necessity. She 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 feels suffocated and starts neglecting herself. But Lalit’s younger brother Raju provides a vent to her suppressed desires. Parvati finds him charming and attractive:

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.  

Parvati and Raju enjoy sex without any guilt as a consequence of physical and psychological neglect. Parvati defies Lalit’s order by refusing to sleep in the bedroom after the arrival of Raju. She 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. Though Parvati indulges in a physical relationship with Raju, her husband’s younger brother, she craves for Lalit’s love and attention. Parvati even endures the pain and suffering inflicted upon her husband. She starts loving her husband but he dies due to tuberculosis:

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.  

After the death of Lalit, Parvati gets to know about her pregnancy and the fourth phase of her life begins which is more tragic as she loses her sanity. Thus, Parvati’s journey is the journey of a girl to a middle aged woman, who has coped with her marginal status by being insane. Parvati was denied the emotional security and also the bliss of conjugal life, by her husband. At one point readers feel that Parvati is a modern, emancipated female but her insanity proves the readers wrong. Parvati gives birth to a girl child in the state of insanity. The family pressures
and social pressures in Parvati’s life finally turn her into a lunatic. This state of Parvati raises very crucial question as who is responsible for the abuse of a woman her uncle, her husband, Salman or the social conditions?

Masterji informed Mukul Nainwal, who is in love with Parvati and Lalit’s friend. But Masterji chooses Lalit as he belongs to the same caste and as per the social orthodox conventions one should marry in the same caste. When on deathbed, Hiranandaji makes a legal will and declares Mukul as caretaker of his wealth. So Mukul travels back to Nainital. During travelling he recalls the past in which he had loved the now insane Parvati. He laments the life of the hills, a symbol of patriarchy:

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

Mukul is deeply hurt after knowing that Parvati was sent to an asylum and Ira was left at the mercy of Mukul. This reveals the marginality of woman in human relationships especially when a woman becomes useless or is yet to attain the age of being useful. Mukul’s behavior and escape from Nainital raises certain questions related to emotional and physical status of Parvati. The reluctance of Parvati’s cousin Puran and his family to look after the helpless woman is 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 loves her he does not have the courage to accept Parvati and her daughter. He abandons her when she is badly in need of him. Thus the novel explores the lives of women living in dependence, and deplorable conditions, their love, their longing, yearning and ultimately their fate. They are marginalized by tradition, religion, society and above all the system designed by men.

Namita Gokhale’s next novel *Shakuntala* sub-titled *The Play of Memory* is a delicately woven novel on the life of a rustic belle Shakuntala from the hill forest. This novel is about collective anguish and misery borne off the weight of expectations carried by Indian women and their submission and self-erasure. The story draws comparison and contrast from Kalidasa’s *Shankuntala*, the prime example of a woman caught in a circumstantial whirlpool and rescued only by divine intervention. Gokhale discovers an entire world of meaning in her exploration of what the idea of Shakuntala can open up. She uses Kalidas’s immortal tale of love and betrayal to explore her ideas of how women have engaged in their own enslavement and liberation with the picaresque adventures of a tempestuous wild girl from the hills named Shakuntala.

In this novel Gokhale depicts the struggle of Shakuntala against the patriarchal norms that tries to suppress and extinguish her individuality and identity. Its strength lies in its optimism and in its force to open up new and fresh avenues for discussion of women, their
personal emotions and aspirations. On the Ghats of Kashi a young woman is directed by a sightless priest to come to terms with an earlier life that binds her in the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. She recalls the life in which she was Shakuntala, spirited, imaginative and adventurous like, her legendary namesake, but destined to suffer the “Samaskaras of abandonment”:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidas’s classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was a nymph, daughter of the Celestia apsara, Menaka who seduced the sage Vishwamitra and later by her husband Dushyanta – one could say that she carried within herself the Sanskaras of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name. 29

Shakuntala, the chief protagonist of the novel questions the rules and customs of society and when opportunity arrives explores unknown to satisfy her quench of adventurous spirit. Shakuntala is born into a poor Varanasi 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, heirless girl”! She shrieks “were you born only to trouble and torment me”. 30

Thus Shakuntala, the heroine of the novel is a provincial girl living with her widowed and illiterate mother along with brother Govinda. She is carefree and very spirited girl, eager and restless to
explore the world. However Shakuntala’s life is dictated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society that are ingrained into the feminine psyche. According to her mother, her life is meant only to be a wife and mother. Shakuntala is denied of basic happiness and space which she yearns for, but fails to achieve. She is forced to lead a life that denies her any freedom. She is portrayed as a simple girl cherishing the dream of leading a life that fascinates her. Her family neglects and ignores her existence as a human being. Shakuntala’s mother showers all her love upon her son Govinda. For the entire day, things are planned and executed as per the priority of Govinda. She provides good food and education to her son and also appoints a teacher for his studies.

Shakuntala does not share the loving rapport with her mother and maintains a distance from her. Since 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.  

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’.  

As a child Shakuntala is eager to learn grammar, Sanskrit and scriptures but she is denied education on account of her gender. As a girl, she is “restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds.” Thus, Shakuntala is really an unconventional girl. She considered household work as a burden and manages to cope with drudgery by eavesdropping on her brother’s lessons delivered by a tutor. Once deeply hurt by the mother Shakuntala runs away from home for the first time and finds refuge in a cave with a woman who sown the seeds of freedom in her by introducing her to the mysteries and power of mother goddess. She further tells Shakuntala that mother goddess 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.” This lesson is valuable to Shakuntala and kindles her interest to reject responsibilities of a comfortable and happily married life.

Aptly Gokhale chooses the backdrop of the rise of Buddhism to tell her story of the archetypal Indian woman; a time of radical religious dynamism and iconoclasm when for a woman even shaving her head and leaving home to become a nun was a kind of freedom. The story follows the life of a girl – a reincarnation of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala – who enacts what seems like an unalterable screen play in this life, while clamoring for freedom to live the way she wants and love the way she wills.
‘Commence a new life’ the Buddha exhorts, but Shakuntala questions—how can one do that without having a new life different from the one delineated by parents, partner, and priests? When she does rewrite the script of her life literally shedding her anklets and figuratively her shackles she finds her intact, thwarted and her path too twisted to tread. The following quote of Simon De Beauvoir is supportive to her condition:

The situation of women is that she – a free and autonomous being like all creatures never the less finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other. 33

‘Shakuntala’ is an intriguing interplay of history and myth suffused with profound metaphysical queries about the self.

I am Shakuntala the prototype of all women, right from ancient times to the modern. My names have been changing. I may be called as a representative of the womanhood. I have the capacity to create the storm ----In fact the woman is not only the symbol of zeal and beauty but also the symbol of great toughness. But still the fact remains that she has been treated as subsidiary. Therefore she has been considered as the object of pity. 34

Those were the days when a woman had to depend on a man, may be in the form of her father, husband or son. She did not have any independent identity. Marriage and love needed social sanction. In mythology, every woman, though having great qualities and virtues had suffered a lot in the same way. It may be
Kunti, Gandhari or Draupadi. Those women proved themselves great with the virtue of tolerance.

But “What does a woman get from the society?” is a question to be asked. On several occasions Shakuntala is dominated by her mother for being a female child. On receiving puberty when Shakuntala’s menstruation starts she is treated scornfully by her mother who is driven by orthodox beliefs and rituals when her mother watches the blood trickling down the legs of Shakuntala who is in the kitchen at that time; she cries out “Have you no modesty, girl.”

Menstruation though a natural phenomenon is treated as a taboo in cultural and religious norms. So many restrictions are imposed on women due to the notions of purity and defilement. A woman in menstruation is considered as impure and is not allowed to come out of their seclusion, touch or even show her face to others. Shakuntala is dragged to the low stoop beside the cowshed by her mother. Full of anguish and pain Shakuntala asked herself what she had done wrong.

Bitter experiences of her childhood lead Shakuntala to spend her time in loneliness. She hates everything about her mother. Sometimes she reacts against the discrimination of her mother “with an anger so violent that it surprised” her also. When mother compares Govinda as a reflection of some divine Shakuntala dissolves into a jealous rage and plucks all the marigolds in the
garden and stamps on them till they are interred in the damp earth. Her rage is symbolic of her rebellion against the male female child discrimination. Shakuntala feels burdened up by the oppressive dominance of her mother who always insisted on her conforming to the traditional way of life. Shakuntala decided to free herself from the bondage of her mother. So she says “I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation.”

Commenting on marriage Simone de Beauvoir says:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a protector – is for her (woman) the most important of understanding ---- she will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of new master.  

The Women writers articulate the pressures of being a woman. When as a child Shakuntala is indulged in activities like tree climbing, wandering in the woods, she was told that “it is most unsuitable for young ladies” In fact all natural or spontaneous expression of feelings is denied to a woman. A girl is made conscious of her periphery and centrality of male right. The entire rearing and gearing up of a girl is male oriented as her salvation unlike men’s, lies in marriage. All prepare her for this ultimate cherished destiny. In our marriage obsessed society, relationship with a male in marriage has been considered to be an all
important step in women’s self-realization. This traditional prop however seems to rather aggravate the identity crisis.

For Shakuntala marriage is a way to rebel and release herself from the clutches of her mother. The protagonist of the novel *Shakuntalais* also eager to get married not because she loves somebody but she considers marriage as an escape from the bondage of her situation. She is married to Srijan, a rich man the chief of fourteen villages. She is the third wife of Srijan and the most beloved. His previous wives were dead and have not given him any children. Shakuntala and Srijan love the company of each other. He wanted Shakuntala to be like the star of Arundhati, the emblem of Fidelity.

Shakuntala wants to fly like a bird. She is thirsty for knowledge and travelling. But her mother used to tell her not to forget that the vessel of her virtue is like the urn of water, she balances on her head and she must not spill even a drop as she carried it home. But after marriage Shakuntala follows the duties of a wife neglecting her real desire of travelling and getting more and more experiences. But she knows that there is more inside her than the limits of her experience dictated. Shakuntala’s aspired freedom and joy is, however, illusory and short-lived. Srijan brings a beautiful handmaiden, Kamalini from one of his foreign journeys. The exotic beauty of Kamalini makes Shakuntala jealous and insecure of her authority and position in Srijan’s life and house. She becomes anxious of her future and is apprehensive of her
possible replacement by Kamalini. Shakuntala feels betrayed and frustrated by Kamalini’s presence in the house and says:

I was not angry with Srijan – he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. 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 east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes.\(^{36}\)

This quote quite loudly reveals the marginal position of women in conjugal relationship. Besides, Kamalini hardly behaves like a maid. This sets off a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala. Nita Gupta comments: ‘Unable to handle her unspoken jealousies, she chooses to walk out of the relationship’.\(^{37}\)

Thus the maid brought by Srijan when looked down upon Shakuntala from a great height and viewed her with contempt, Shakuntala came to the conclusion that Srijan’s love for her is over and completely vanished and Shakuntala remained as a so called Dasi of Srijan’s house. Once Shakuntala expressed her desire to the priest that she wanted to see the world and wanted to travel like men. But the priest guides her that men are the masters of women. The society believes that a father protects the daughter in childhood. The husband protects a woman in youth and sons protect her in old age. So the woman is never fit for independence and this is the way of the
world. Shakuntala thinks – is it the way of the world to crush the
desires and aspirations of woman in all the possible way?

In this background Shakuntala decides to leave her husband’s
house as she feels insecure there. Arrival of Kamalini and
Shakuntala’s instinctual and eternal desire “to wander with the
freedom of birds and clouds” are the two motives that trigger off a
transformation of the very course of her life. When Shakuntala gets
pregnant she is advised to visit the holy temple to pray for a safe
childbirth. At the temple Shakuntala meets a Greek Mercenary, a
foreigner, Nearchus. She elopes with him to live freely and travel the
world. She throws her silver anklet which is symbolic of her
breaking off the shackles of her home and family. The rebel and
seeker in her revels in the new found freedom and independence and
she does not even hesitate to develop a sexual relationship with
Nearchus. She is aware of the fact that Nearchus is a Yavana, a
Mlenachha, a foreigner who is considered as impure by the
conventions. His presence is considered to be a polluting influence
on the high castes but still Shakuntala dares to run away with him.
Her rebellion symbolizes the rebellion against the patriarchal norms
and constraints but also against social and religious codes and
dogmas.

This is the turning point in the life of Shakuntala as she gains a
new identity by casting down her previous identity as Shakuntala. She
thinks that her craving for travelling can be quenched by Nearchus. So
she deserts her home for the company of a Greek horse merchant to explore the world and gain new experience.

Shakuntala starts living with Yavana and surrenders herself to this new life. She loves his company and is glad to be free and alone. As he has travelled a lot and has seen and known many places, Shakuntala is excited by his company. She starts enjoying life and flying like a free bird. Occasionally she feels homesick but now the way to go back has been ceased. On the banks of the Ganga she feels an intense sense of homecoming. Gradually she sensed that her presence is a burden for Yavana. But she is helpless now because she knows that the society will not accept her once again in the same role as she was in the past. She has broken the so called limits of the society. “The coyness of mine was no more in her now.” Is the reaction of Yavana? When Yavana has watched the classic play “Abhiyana Shakuntalam” he tells Yaduri that it is easy for men to forget women they meet. Shakuntala now Yaduri thinks that her relationship with Yavana has not a social sanction of marriage, as she has betrayed her husband even if he also has betrayed Shakuntala. If Shakuntala has to live a free and desired life she has to become Yaduri, a fallen woman but Srijan is free to marry again and again as society accepts this.

Yaduri at last leaves Yavana and wants to live with the daughter in her womb. But on Ghats of Kashi she loses her infant in the womb itself. She wants to abandon the world, as the world has
abandoned her. Shakuntala expresses her freedom and individuality by shedding all the memories associated with her earlier life. Hence she changes her name from Shakuntala to “Yaduri”, means the uninhabited, the fallen one. She tries to redefine herself by changing her name which symbolically represents the need to redefine the status of woman in the society.

Thus, *Shakuntala: the play of Memory* is a story of a woman who does not want to walk the path of subjugation laid before her by the society. She rebels against the rules and codes of society that curbs her individuality and right to live her life fully and freely. She does not allow her dreams and desires to be crushed under the heels of male dominance and undertaking a journey to fulfill and realize her desires and aspirations. 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.’

Gokhale’s presentation of women, thus, takes into its fictional account all those issues that ultimately reflect upon their precarious conditions in a society which is governed by male supremacy. Her portrayal of women, living in the mountains adds very meaningful dimension to her fiction. Her concern with the average and the ordinary women especially, underscores the problems of education and exposure, innocence and experience, discrimination and
exploitation faced by this marginalized women. This concern turns her fiction into an interrogation against the dominant gender dynamics there by bringing out the marginalization of women on basis of gender.

In the writing of Namita Gokhale, the female persona seems to be very vulnerable and the victim of a too powerful patriarchal system. However she epitomizes not only the rise of womanhood but also the emergence of a New Indian Woman. Her writing reveals a strong protest, questioning, questing and a growing assertion and celebration of their identity as a woman, their efforts to emerge triumphant from the throttling corners of sheer marginalisation.

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