CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
Namita Gokhale is one of the prominent young Indian novelists emerging in the early nineteen eighties. Before we come to the analysis of her novels, it sounds proper to say a word about Namita Gokhale. She was born in 1956 in the Kumaon Himalayas. She was 17 year-old college girl when she met her future spouse, Rajiv Gokhale, the son of the law minister in Indira Gandhi’s cabinet. They were married in six months, and moved to Bombay where Namita Gokhale worked as a film journalist. In the late 70s, she edited Super, a film magazine, along with her husband. She was stricken with cancer of the uterus while finishing Paro and barely survived. A few years later her husband, who had been drinking heavily, died of cirrhosis of the liver. Namita Gokhale’s literary production consists of five novels, some books of non-fiction and
several articles. She lives in Delhi with her two daughters and continues to work as a journalist.

It has been noticed that women writers mostly focus on women characters, on women's lives and experiences in their writings. Books by women present detailed accounts of women's emotions, ideas and preoccupations. Being a woman novelist of the post-independence India, Namita Gokhale primarily takes up her pen with the women issues revealing their own experiences as women. As other feminist writers do, she also revolts against the stereotypical definition of women in the man-ruled society. A woman always holds the centre stage of her fictional world. A woman's desire, her efforts and failures in her relationship with men in the tradition-oriented Indian society are the main issues of her novels. Namita Gokhale's depiction of women's world is authentic, realistic and credible. Her novels present a social world of many complex relationships. Doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of values push her characters to intense self-examination, redefinition and rediscovery of their own roles, position and relationship with the male-counterparts. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. They struggle to transcend the restrictive roles assigned to them by the society. They rebel, reject and seek freedom from the traditional norms and ways of life.
The Indian woman has been for years a silent sufferer. While she plays different roles – as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. A woman is always expected to subordinate all her wishes and desires to someone else – a parent, a husband or a son. In this connection, Simone de Beauvoir has this view: “The majority of women do not escape from the traditional feminine society nor their husbands the assistance they need to become in concrete fact the equals of the men.”

Namita Gokhale belongs to the new group of young novelists like Arundhati Roy, Shobha De who celebrate female sexuality with a view to making aware of a woman’s emotional and physical needs. Being a radical feminist Namita Gokhale analyses the true reality of human relationships in which women are the sufferers. To liberate the women from the male supremacy, she attacks the male through sex within or outside marriage. “Sex means many things to different people. It can be a challenge, an ego booster, a weapon, a duty, an obsession, a bore, a trauma, a pastime, a tranquillizer, an insult, or a sport. It can be meaningful or it can be empty.” The same is seen in the fictional world of Namita Gokhale. Every character of her novels indulges in sexual relation for one purpose or other. In her depiction of women
characters, she makes a departure from conformity to non-conformity. Her women are totally void of traditional values. To notice the sharp contrast between the conformist and non-conformist view, it is worth noting what N. Sharada writes about traditional marriage and sexuality:

The concept of honour plays an important role in the repression of the girl's sexuality. Any misbehaviour on her part would bring shame both to herself and her family, resulting in decreased chances of a good match. She is groomed for the fulfillment of the desired goal of her existence – marriage. All the prayers and rituals of a girl’s life are directed towards the procurement of a husband, his longevity and the propagation of his lineage through the birth of male offsprings.³

For a traditional woman whose livelihood and career is chiefly that of wife and mother, marriage is the most important event in her life. For women the right marriage often means a good life, the wrong marriage a hard one. Finding the right man and marrying him is the chief hope and concern of most young women. In her book Problems of Women's Marriage and Violence, Veena Pani Pandey also gives the true account of the pitiable situation in a girl’s life. She writes:
When girls are about ready for marriage, it is the like being auctioned like a heifer. Women come and look them over to see if they will make fit wives. This Indian method of exhibiting a girl does lower her concept of herself as a person. She is being weighed against money, property, her accomplishments, her fair-skin but not against her character, her personality. This concept of self becomes a negative one. She is the efficient server of the family, not a thinking individual.4

Sheila Ruth makes a deep analysis about women’s condition under patriarchal authority in her book Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women’s Studies. She defines patriarchy as a society in which formal power over public decision and policy-making are held by adult men. She also studies the sexist notion that claims males as intelligent, responsible and courageous in a special and desirable way while women are weak and dependent. Hence, males rather than females are suited to authority. Saying about gendered role, she recounts the secondary position of women in a patriarchal household. Generally, a wife, university educated or illiterate, is assigned to do house-work of cooking, washing, sweeping, cleaning without a salary for their work. Even though she is a working woman, she must quit her job to follow her husband when he is transferred to another posting as the husband’s job is more important
than the wife’s. So wives are compelled only to look after the family needs annihilating their own skill and personality. Sheila Ruth further presents a woman’s lot tamed and conditioned for centuries by the patriarchal society to follow and conform to the traditional norms. She writes:

Stories of Cindrella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty teach us that we are born to be chosen, admired, and sought after, and that to succeed in this goal of being chosen certain attributes are required: physical beauty, ‘good nature’ (willingness to take unwarranted abuse), modesty, self-effacement, piety, vulnerability, suffering, and good luck... It is the prince who picks what he wants; our chief responsibility is to make ourselves ‘pickable’, as worthy of his interest as we can.\(^5\)

Namita Gokhale focuses the purpose of her works on the deconstruction of the traditional values and concepts related to man-woman relationship. Through her novels, she makes a grave attempt to shake off the chains of the patriarchal conventions and morality that diminish the female personality. She is very frank in the treatment of sex. Her first book *Paro: Dreams of Passion* that appeared in 1984 causes a stir throughout the country pioneering in a sexually frank genre in Indian writing in English. Many women writers are not
comfortable writing about sex. They have the fear of how people may react to them. Confronting such taboo, Namita Gokhale’s sexual genre becomes an act of defying the age-old establishment of Indian fiction. Her graphic presentation of sex with an uninhibited frankness is a bold and daring step taken as a kind of subversion against the traditional image of Indian women as coy, shy, modest, delicate daughters and housewives of the male-rulled households. She combines eroticism with the realism of man-woman relationship in her fictions. There are elements of satire and humour in her technique of writing. She ridicules and criticizes the class distinction, caste system, marriage and religious institutions, politicians, the hypocrisy and the dual personality of the upper, middle and the lower class people of Indian society.

Love, lust, infidelity, failure in marriage and its consequent feeling of loneliness become the major themes of Namita Gokhale’s novels. “Marriage and sexuality as a subject of study has been left unexplored by most of the early Indo-English novelists, as it was over-shadowed by the various socio-political problems that dominated the milieu.” Namita Gokhale explores the issues of marital disharmony, its root-causes and the bitter consequences prevailing in the patriarchal society. She presents adultery and incest as the only way to set female mind and body free from male-domination and oppression. She makes a fatal attack on the traditional concepts of marriage and caste hierarchy. All her

For the sake of convenience in argument and analysis, the thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter I is the introduction to the whole thesis. It gives a brief introductory note on the author and a comprehensive picture of what the thesis is about.

Chapter II deals with the current trend of presenting marriage and its disharmony as the leitmotif in the fictions written by women novelists of the contemporary India. It is so because while studying Namita Gokhale’s novels it is important to understand the contemporary women-centred issues of which marriage and marital disharmony are prominent. In this connection some selected novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shobha De in addition to Namita Gokhale’s novels are discussed at length. This chapter throws light on why women novelists in the Indian context are so crazed by broken and failed marriages.
In the Third Chapter, an attempt is made to study Namita Gokhale’s approach towards the problem of adultery and incest as the manifestation of female liberation thereby paving the way for failure in love and marriage. Namita Gokhale presents almost all her characters as non-stickers to their spouse and marriage. However, she shows her heroines’ indulgence in the extra-marital relations as a compulsive act to go parallel with the double-standard of their male-counterparts. It is the man who invites his wife to jump into the bed of another man by his indifference and lack of communication in sharing and understanding the emotional and physical needs of his wife. Neena Arora in her study of Nayantara Sahgal and Doris Lessing thus views:

The basis for a happy and harmonious marriage is the feeling of sharing, equality and true partnership. But in the patriarchal division of values, equality is not possible because all the superior and positive qualities are attributed to men and the qualities associated with women are considered to be inferior.  

This inequality in the personal value between man and woman provokes women to seek equality in getting the same privileges men are enjoying. In the book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir also gives the reason why women are having promiscuous relations outside the wedlock. She argues that the
gendered bias and the superior feeling of the male in doing whatever they like without considering the sentiments of women make way for the enraged wives to launch counter-attack against their husbands and to liberate themselves from the bondage to unhappy marriage. She writes:

For loyalty and friendship to exist between man and wife, the essential condition is that they both be free in relation to each other and be equal in concrete matters. Since man alone possesses economic independence and since he holds – by law and custom – the advantages attached to masculinity, it is natural for him to appear a tyrant, and this drives woman to revolt and dissimulation.  

Namita Gokhale projects women on a par with the cynicism and hypocrisy of the men they encounter in their life. Paro and Priya’s adultery is the aftermath of B.R.’s infidelity and sexual violence. Parvati’s incestuous relation with her brother-in-law is a furious response to the caste-based marriage to an insensitive husband. Shakuntala’s elopement with an unknown traveller is a revolt against the humiliation and mental torture inflicted by unfaithful husband. Namita Gokhale articulates her deep concern over gender-oppression in her novels. She wants to convey that adultery and incest are the means of women’s liberation from broken marriages.
The picture Namita Gokhale presents us as regards marriage is one of despair and gloom. Arranged or love, the marriages fail almost in all her novels for one reason or the other. The endless conflict between the disagreeable spouse and its resultant loneliness are discussed in this chapter. In the article "Why Most Marriage Fail", Gerald Mc Nicholl gives some factors that contribute to the failure in marriage. He says that lack of proper communication between husband and wife, financial issues and even the circumstances of the marriage lead to the failure in marriage. He writes:

Love may conquer all but sometimes even love isn't enough to save a marriage when there are significant financial concerns. Even the circumstances surrounding the marriage can lead to its failure. A marriage of convenience is often not a healthy marriage. When the decision to marry is based on something other than true love, it is likely that the marriage will fail.⁹

Truly enough, the love marriages of Paro-B.R., Gudiya-Kalki and the arranged marriages of Priya-Suresh, Parvati-Lalit and Shakuntala-Srijan break down irrevocably. Outwardly, everything seems to be smooth, but inwardly, they suffer the trauma of marital disharmony. Even though the husband and the wife live together in the same house, their lack of communication and the
feeling of alienation keep them wide apart from each other. Parvati’s loneliness even in that crowded house of her husband’s joint family is easily palpable. Barrenness or infertility is also a factor for the failure in marriage. Priya’s miscarriage gives a sharp blow to their married life. It loosens the bond between her and Suresh and keeps disconnected under the same roof. Shakuntala’s inability to conceive makes Srijan bring another woman in his house thereby hurting the feeling of the former. Despite their sleeping together in the same bedchamber, the marriage loses its meaning and each partner feels defeated and suffers from void and loneliness. Germaine Greer’s observation may be cited here:

Loneliness is never more cruel than when it is felt in closed propinquity with someone who has ceased to communicate. Many a housewife staring at the back of her husband’s newspaper, or listening to his breathing in bed is lonelier than any spinster in a rented room. Much of the loneliness of lonely people springs from distrust and egotism, not from their having failed to set themselves up in a conjugal arrangement.¹⁰

So Namita Gokhale creates characters, both male and female, who are neither faithful lovers nor devoted wives. There is no marriage of true minds in
her novels. Temporal passion and lust hover around every character. Consequently, there is failure in marriage followed by loneliness and pain.

In Chapter IV, Namita Gokhale's women characters are discussed at length in the light of the 'New Woman'. Woman is generally weak and delicate by nature whereas man is stronger compared with her. However, the physical strength of man is often misinterpreted as 'superiority' giving woman subordinate status. Traditionally woman lives under the protection of man accepting her weakness and dependent position. She is denied the freedom to make their own choices even in personal matters. In the patriarchal household, she does only what the man approves. She tries hard to make herself likeable to her man for fear of abandonment. In this context, what Germaine Greer remarks may be aptly cited:

> It is a commonplace observation that women are forever trying to straighten their hair if it is curly and curl if it is straight, bind their breasts if they are large and pad them if they are small, darken their hair if it is light and lighten if it is dark.\(^{11}\)

The 'New Woman' laughs at the slavish lifestyle of tradition-oriented women who live for the amusement of the man folk. Namita Gokhale creates
women who are aware of their rights and duties in the society. They demand equality in individual value and status with their men. They can not be treated as parasite and dependent on the male community. They shake off the chains of tradition and convention of the patriarchy and promote an emancipated life living in their own way without the male-support.

The final analysis of what have been discussed in the previous chapters regarding Namita Gokhale’s treatment of the problems and sufferings coming out of marital conflict, male-domination and sexual violence is given in the “Conclusion”.

NOTES


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