Chapter — 4

Voicing the Body through “The Dance of the Honey Bee”

(A Himalayan Love Story)

“We all carry the burden of Sita. The Agnipariksha, the Lakshman rekha is still a part of every woman’s life”

(Gokhale, Interview).

Namita Gokhale’s third novel A Himalayan Love Story (1996) hailed by most of the critics as a melancholic tale of romantic longing and unrequited love, turns out to be a writing of the body as well. It is because of the text’s deconstruction of the limits imposed on women by the dominantly perceived interconnection between sex difference and sexuality. Through Parvati’s narrative, the novel interrogates a woman’s relationship with her body, a relationship which is governed and controlled by social institutions like marriage and family; images like wifehood, widowhood and motherhood; and concepts like procreation and barrenness. The novel unfolds experiences of Parvati at various stages of her life— as a child living an impoverished life with a widowed mother, a vibrant adolescent living with maternal uncle Master Hiranand after her mother’s death, as a wife of homosexual husband Lalit and as a mentally disturbed widow herself.

However, what makes the novel A Himalayan Love Story a writing of the body is not the portrayal of the physical phases of a woman’s life only, but the portrayal and interrogation of female body as a socially constructed and controlled body. About this Gokhale once said, “the world has changed and progressed in so many ways, and yet there is still so much hurt and discrimination that women have to face, through the different phases of life” (Interview by Raj). The novel dismantles the dominant myth of man being “the universal representative of humanity” and woman being “the unnamed and the invisible” (Swami, The Woman Question 7). It also addresses the need for granting space and liberty to women in the matters of sexuality and their relationship with their body. Doing so, the novel also seeks voice for widows, the doubly invisible bodies, who in the Hindu dominated society in India are marginalized, victimized and subjected to repression and oppression even within and by their own gender. To portray
all this, Parvati’s narrative is made the narrative of submission as well as resistance to patriarchal paradigms. She might not emerge as strong as Gokhale’s other women are, but she is portrayed as making occasional efforts to fight social as well as sexual oppression of women as wives and widows. Before taking up an analysis of Parvati’s narrative journey as a feminist statement, let us explore the issue of sexuality and the interlinked images of wifehood and widowhood.

Sexuality, like body, is a social construct and has emerged as one of the key issues in the feminist agenda of transformation of gender relations and gender defined roles and codes. A significant aspect of human embodied existence, sexuality has also been one of the most ambiguous and controversial issues because of the use of this term from different perspectives and in different contexts over years. However, sexuality has now come to be understood much more than a sexological concept related with reproduction. It is now linked to erotic desires, practices, pleasures and identities. Moreover, like other gender-related constructs, it is based on the hierarchical relationship between men and women. It has also been observed that gender inequality is much more prominent in relation to sexuality than in relation to social and racial identities. And it is to challenge this gender inequality that issue of sexuality has become significant in the feminist discourse.

In the dominant discourse, sexuality implies male sexuality and its focus is on male pleasure and sexual initiative. Equating women with body, it considers them passive objects of male desire. It values their sexuality only in relation to male satisfaction and considers their sexuality to be a dark and forbidden continent in relation to women themselves. That is why Naomi Wolf says, “Female sexuality is not only negatively defined, it is negatively constructed” (154-155). Further, this negative construction is a continuous social process. For this, girls are made to learn not to be the desiring ones, but to be the desired ones right from the childhood. A fear psychosis is created in them by repeatedly telling them to be careful to avoid ending up raped and impregnated. That is why a teenage girl is made to learn, “that making her body into her landscape to tame is preferable to any kind of wildness” (Wolf, The Beauty Myth 217). So, a woman is not only expected to be silent about her sexual desire, but is labelled as abnormal, pervert or a sinner in case of any deviation from the cultural code of
sexuality. Prevalence of cross-culture practices—like genital mutilation, use of chastity belts, honour killing, wife-bartering, abusing and beating, sexual ownership of women and female contraceptives—speak of men’s suppression and repression of women’s sexuality. It is this suppression or denial of women’s sexuality which makes a woman, what Germaine Greer calls, the female eunuch. Practices like pornography and prostitution also act to control women’s sexuality, “Women’s sexuality has been policed and regulated in a way which men’s has not: it is the woman prostitute who is stigmatized and punished, not her male clients” (Jackson and Scott, *Feminism and Sexuality* 3).

Even the social institutions of marriage and family along with the overpowering images of wifehood and motherhood have been manipulated to deny women right on their bodies, lives and sexuality. In most of the cultures, the very institution of marriage is based on the subjugated and dependent status of women. In Christian ceremony it is “I now pronounce you man and wife” and not ‘man and woman’ or ‘husband and wife’. In Hindu ceremony ‘Kanyadaan’ and the privileged status accorded to the groom and his family over the bride and bride’s family speak of men’s dominance over women in married life. In fact, in the name of wifehood, a host of responsibilities and restraints are imposed on female bodies in almost every culture and every period. That is why Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*) interrogated social institutions curbing women through practices like child marriage, family ties, widowhood and casteism in 19th century India. Similarly, Bell hooks (*Feminism is for Everybody*) too draws attention to domestic relationship with patriarchal parents or spouses as examples of patriarchal domination among the black in the contemporary times.

It is because in almost all cultures the overlapping images of wifehood and motherhood govern a woman’s identity. A woman is known in relation to her husband, and marriage is considered to be the ultimate goal of a woman’s life. In the context of Indian society, wifehood becomes more restrictive because of the ideal image of Sati-Sita-Savitri. About this Gokhale told Mita Kapur, “We all carry the burden of Sita. The Agnipariksha, the Lakshman rekha is still a part of every women’s life” (Interview). Moreover, marriage here is considered an alliance not only between husband and wife but between two families and this leads to women’s multiple subjugation. Even though
our culture eulogises the image of wifehood, yet with its expected roles, it turns out to be a source of women’s physical and mental oppression as well as repression. Moreover, marriage and the concept of wifehood grant a kind of sexual ownership and entitlement to a husband, who expects her wife to make her body available to him for his pleasure whenever he desires.

More than all these factors, the socially-cultivated and self-inculcated submission of women to patriarchal paradigms makes a woman yield to her man’s desire even against her wishes and reduces marriage to a repeated marital rape. Even the institution of family does not play a positive role in case of women. Ironically enough, a woman’s own family also, “instead of being a supportive, nurturing structure, becomes a restrictive factor, tightening its hold on her, encroaching upon her space and her dreams of romance and privacy” (Jain, “The Body in/of the text” 187). Perceiving women to be mere body, family expects her to work hard to attend to the daily needs of the family, to bear and rear children and to carry forward husband’s lineage. Confined to this twenty four hour drudgery, women are expected to ignore not only their emotional needs and intellectual desires but also their sexual desires, a significant aspect of embodied human existence.

Thus, socio-cultural pressure (through the interlinked images of wifehood and motherhood and code of sexuality) not only denies women the right to their own bodies, but also makes their life oppressive and unlivable most of the time. Various feminist thinkers have explored this sexual repression and oppression of women. Adrienne Rich considers compulsory heterosexuality to be the most powerful tool in maintaining male-dominance and women’s subjugation. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, she sums up the measures which deny women control of their bodies through:

- clitoridectomy and infibulations; chastity belts; punishment, including death, for female adultery; punishment, including death for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris; strictures against masturbation; denial of maternal and post-menopausal sexuality; unnecessary hysterectomy. (218)
No doubt, the western modern culture does not have many of these practices, yet it, too displays anti-sexist bias by controlling women’s sexuality and bodies through advanced techniques of cosmetic surgery and new means of reproduction. Like Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler also (in her book *Gender Trouble*) challenges the established categories of gender and sexual desires and supports diversified sexual identities—gay, lesbian, bisexual—as one of the means to break male hegemony and fight against sexual oppression of women. Thinkers like Joseph Bristow also reject the dominant phallic discourse and support providing women with the freedom “to explore and emancipate desires otherwise suppressed in a patriarchal society” (*Sexuality* 9). However, in spite of such challenges to conventional gender difference and sexual orientations, biological difference (along with normative heterosexuality and perception of male superiority) still rules the society and helps to maintain male power and culture by controlling female bodies and sexuality.

It is to break the tyranny of gender defined sexual roles and codes of sexual behavior that the issue of sexuality gains significance as a tool to explore the possibility of a discourse favouring women. Moreover, transformation of perception of society towards women and of women towards themselves requires dismantling of the perception of sexuality as a male domain. It also entails a shift from the male gaze to the female gaze. So, feminists feel that women must learn to be comfortable in their bodies and look at their physical desires differently from the perspective imposed on them for centuries. However, for majority of the feminist writers, insertion of the female gaze and assertion of sexuality do not amount to promiscuity or sexual liberation to have sex with anybody, anytime and anywhere, as propagated by some radical feminists. On the other hand, it implies that sexuality would no longer be used for maintaining gender inequality. It would rather be a means to assert women’s right to freedom of choice “to express sexual desire, initiate sexual interaction and be sexually fulfilled” (hooks, *Feminism for Everybody* 79). Ti-Grace Atkinson’s words are significant in this connection “I do not know any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex. She’d choose freedom every time” (qtd. in Kemp and Squires 358).
Enunciating the above analysed line of feminist thinking, Namita Gokhale’s novel *A Himalayan Love Story* uses body as a site to assert women’s freedom of choice and to question men’s control and ownership of women’s bodies and sexuality. The novel, no doubt, exhibits a dash of gay politics too, by showing plight of men like Lalit in the society dominated by heterosexual normativity; yet the novel foregrounds gender politics and its subversion. The novel does so through the main narrative of Parvati and supporting subnarratives of Parvati’s mother, Mukul’s wife Adeleine and a Tibetan girl Pasang Rampa. The subsequent analysis tries to establish how these women, through their assertion of sexuality, assert their freedom of choice and question patriarchal structures, norms and images imposed on female bodies. The exploration also reveals how the novel emerges out to be a stronger feminist statement by raising voice against the negative role of family and social institutions of marriage and compulsive widowhood in the oppression, repression and suppression of women and their bodies. Further, through an analysis of the brief but significant sub-narrative of Parvati’s daughter Irra, the chapter also considers how the novel takes up the issue of women’s education and financial independence as one of the means to empower women and weaken male hegemony.

The novel *A Himalayan Love Story* is apparently a story of romantic but unrequited love between Parvati and Mukul. However, like other novels by Gokhale, this novel too deconstructs the confines of dominant perception of gender boundaries through the portrayal of Parvati. She is perhaps Gokhale’s only woman who can be related to enclosed domestic space and who is not as assertive as Gokhale’s other women are. That is what has led Mrinal Pandey to say that through Parvati’s narrative, Gokhale “sets to chart the course of survival of those who are not the fittest of their kind” (Review 17). Nonetheless, Parvati displays non-conformity to culturally defined sex role of her gender. However, the distinct feminist appeal of the novel lies in its suggestiveness— saying more through gaps and silences— and sustained derisive tone against patriarchy.

The first section of the novel, narrated in Parvati’s (female) voice, is titled “Parvati: The Dance of the Honeybee” and is quite shorter than the second section—“Mukul: Dreams of Reason” — narrated in Mukul’s (male) voice. The two titles seem to
pit body (woman) against reason (mind/man). The difference in the length of the chapters apparently points out the dominantly perceived superiority of the mind/man over the body/woman. However, Gokhale’s denial of this dominant perception becomes clear from the fact that though the longer section narrated by Mukul, narrates his career, marriage and various relationships— with his mentor master Hiranand, his friend Lalit, his wife Adeleine and her daughter Marie, and a Tibetan refugee Pasang Rampa—yet it focalizes Parvati’s life, her relationship with Mukul and her impact on him and his life. His ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ from Hongkong to the Wee Nooke is not so much to honour the desire of his dead mentor Master Hiranand as to revisit Parvati and relive his own memories of the time spent with her—“An unrequited love, long since forgotten, was beckoning me home” (A Himalayan Love Story 56). So in a way, by making Mukul articulate about Parvati’s acts and attitudes, and others’ acts and attitudes towards her, the section also turns out to be a story about ‘the body’, the woman Parvati. Moreover, the section turns out to be a mocking commentary on the sexist bias and inactivity of Mukul (Gokhale’s only male narrator), who proves to be a hollow man and lacks the capacity to decide and act. The section deconstructs the dominant myth of man as a being of reason and action through the portrayal of Master Hiranand, Lalit and Raju as well.

Like other novels of Gokhale, the novel A Himalayan Love Story, too, begins by portraying the subjugated status of women in order to foreground the feminist stance of the text through contrast. Parvati’s utterances in the beginning of the first section, “I have always recognized that I carry an emptiness inside me” (HLS 3) and further “I was doomed. I had nothing to gain in life, only to lose” (15) reflect the oppressive and repressive effect of socio-cultural constraints and restraints on women. However, this awareness of her pitiable plight marks her first step towards feminist liberation and transformation. Instead of being non-reactive like the stereotyped image of patient and submissive women, she nurtures “constant festering sense of anger and unease” (3) at her being “trapped inside my skin and bone and circumstance” (3). She realizes that it is her embodiment as a woman which is weighing her down. As the only daughter of a poor, illiterate widow, Parvati is compelled not only to live an impoverished life but also to face gender-bias even as a child. In fact, the gendered body experience as a child seems to be an important phase in the march of Gokhale’s women towards selfhood.
Priya, Gudiya and Shakuntala too, are shown in this phase and made to face this bias at the hands of their own mother / grandmother. This is done not only to make the dominant gender difference visible but also to enable these women to emerge stronger and to use such experiences to their advantages.

Parvati’s mother, deeply rooted in patriarchy herself, often curses her for being a girl and laments that had she been a son, she could earn and provide for her in her old age. Her utterance—“It’s a double curse, to first be born a woman, then get straddled with another female to provide for” (6) sums up the pitiable plight of the women, particularly widows, who suffer because of their economic dependence on others. Since Parvati’s widowed mother is dependent on her stepbrother Master Hiranand for financial support, she nurtures a kind of social and financial insecurity and this is reflected in her anti-sexist bias against Parvati, “It would be different if you were a boy… then you could earn and provide for me in my old age” (6). However, in spite of this patriarchal attitude towards Parvati, she subverts the commonly perceived image of a self-sacrificing, self-effacing and self-denying widow. Instead of being content with living a life of deprivation and self-pity, she is seen as an assertive woman who knows the art of surviving in a patriarchal set up. Her attempts to supplement the family income by knitting for others, and her exploration of bee keeping as an occupation set her apart from the stereotyped image of docile and passive women. Aware of the vulnerability of a young widow, she is conscious about her self-respect—“she could tongue-lash anybody in Jeolikote who trod on her sensibilities, and her eyes were frequently aflash with anger as she confronted yet another dupe who had mistakenly dealt with her as a vulnerable widow” (5). It is this attitude of hers, which her stepbrother Master Hiranand calls “over-masculine approach to life” (39).

This over-masculine approach (by patriarchal standards) of hers is reflected also in her transgressing the dominantly perceived link between gender and sexuality. In spite of her conservative lower middle class background, she does not hesitate from asserting her sexuality, though for a brief period of time, like the honey bee, which is used as a prominent motif in the title—“The Dance of the Honeybee”—and the narrative in the first section. This is what has led Kuhu Chanana to say that the title of the section is “loaded with multiple meanings. It is indicative of the freedom of sexual
choice” of Parvati’s mother by drawing “a parallel between Parvati’s mother and the queen honey bees in terms of sexual rendezvous” (163). Her attraction for Shrikrishnji, the kirana-shop owner, has nothing to do with gaining financial advantage from him, for she always pays for the frugal grocery bought from him. It is purely sexual attraction, a biological desire, which draws her towards him, and its fulfillment brings a glow on her face and rhythm in her gait. Lack of love in their union is aptly symbolized by her getting hurt by a bee sting and also by her failure in making business out of bee keeping. The sudden departure of Shrikrishnji to the plains—parallel to the role of male drone—and consequent denial of sexual satisfaction has a negative effect on her. It is not only makes her look older and thinner but ultimately, a health wreck leading to her death through her brief sub-narrative, the novel subverts the image of widowhood and begins its interrogation of the patriarchal repression and suppression of female sexuality, asserted more prominently through the narrative of Parvati.

In fact, through Parvati’s narrative, Namita Gokhale attempts to lay bare multiple levels of oppression, suppression and repression—physical, mental, emotional, sexual—experienced by women because of their embodiment as women and subjection to the images of wifehood and widowhood. Parvati, like her mother, is portrayed as caught between the pulls of patriarchal conditioning and tradition on the one hand, and assertion of the self and sexuality on the other. However, through Parvati’s periodic attitudes and acts of resistance, assertion and transgression, Gokhale tries to stress that old patterns of patriarchal behaviour are no longer acceptable. Like other fictional women (Priya, Shakuntala) of Gokhale, Parvati also, begins her narrative journey as a victim of the sexist bias in the hands of her own mother, who curses and ill treats her for not being a boy. She has to bear her mother’s slap for her small delights such as making a palace of pine cones. However, her awareness of her victim status, consequent feeling of emptiness inside and recognition of her own strengths (stubbornness and revolting attitude) make her different from a stereotyped girl of her age and in her situation:

“I resolved to put together the world’s largest collection of pine cones. Even if a palace of pine cones was not really a workable idea, I would find some other
sensible use for them. Mother would realize how wrong she had been and repent. She would apologize for that slap, and I would forgive her. (14)

Her interest in bees makes her see a parallel in the segregation of the sexes in bees and humans. She equates pahari men with drones who just loiter around chewing tobacco and playing cards and live on the labour of their women folk — “they were the drones who gratefully let the labour to their women… Female bees do all the work of nest-making and provisioning” (11). This awareness of her own oppressive state in the context of the subjugated status of Pahari women folk marks Parvati’s first step towards interrogation of the male hegemony.

In order to turn this first feminist step by Parvati into a leap, Gokhale makes clever use of her favourite narrative strategy of shifting her fictional women away from patriarchal constraints and restraints. With her mother’s death after a serious illness, Parvati is shifted to the open and comfortable environment of her maternal uncle master Hiranand’s house, famous as Wee Nooke. In fact, since her mother’s illness, Parvati knew about the coming change in her life—“My uncle’s house was Sahib’s house with servants and sofas, and I looked forward to the day I would get to live there” (21). This thought of the coming liberation and comforts makes her not grieve much at her mother’s death, “I was deeply shamed of by my lack of sorrow” (21). However, the depressed and nervous Parvati of old times now transforms into “a merry young creature” whom she herself fails to recognize “I hardly recognized this new Parvati. She intimidated me a little”(22). This healthy transformation in Parvati highlights the feminists’ stress on the need for freedom and space in a woman’s life.

In this free and liberated environment, Parvati’s fictional journey takes another new turn with Gokhale using body as a site to explore female sexuality and assert women’s right to freedom and control on their bodies. Free as a honeybee, Parvati now starts enjoying the dance of her own passions and physical desires. Her first encounter is with Salman Siddiqui, her history tutor. Her attraction for Salman, like her mother’s attraction for Shrikrishnji, is purely physical. She feels attracted by his exceptional physical charms:
“I was dazzled by his beauty. I could immediately sense that Salman wore a mask, but the knowledge excited and challenged me. We knew when our eyes met that we were ancient partners, and our shadows embraced right there in the middle of masterji’s drawing room. (23)

The physical basis of her attraction for Salman is reflected again in Parvati’s comparison of the colour of their skins. She says “Salman was undoubtedly the fairer, and the curly black hair on his arms made me shudder with desire” (26). This reflection of Salman by Parvati subverts patriarchy—firstly, by presenting woman as a gazer, and secondly, by vesting her with agency i.e. the capacity to think and act. In spite of her awareness, “I was hurtling towards disaster, but of course I didn’t care” (24), she indulges in devastating bliss with Salman and explores the pleasures of her body. She recalls “nothing in my meager experience of physical pleasures had ever predicted such ecstasy” and “my entire body was afire, all discretion had abandoned me” (24).

Masterji’s words uttered to her in the context of her studies “Awake, arise and stop not till the goal is reached” (23) are put into practice by her in exploring her sensuality and sexuality. Breaking the shackles of feminine values of self-effacement, self-denial and self-sacrifice, she follows the call of her heart and physical desires. About her body’s response to her physical experience, she says, “my hymen was still intact, although was getting increasingly agitated about its expeditious disposal” (26). Even during the days of her hospitalization due to typhoid fever, she enjoys pleasures of the body with Salman every night, “I had never imagined that the human body could be the instrument of such delights” (28).

She reflects on the details of the union:

I could feel his warm breath travelling across my neck, my collarbones and my breasts. Convulsions of joy rippled through my body, shudders of anticipation and delight, like waves on the lake, each merging into the other, faster and faster, like an April storm, and then a streak of lightning and the sound of thunder and the rain falling into the lake and seeking through the valley. (28)

Summing up the joyful impact of this fulfillment of her sexuality, she realizes “I had left Wee Nooke a girl, I returned a woman” (29). Such details, by focusing on the sexual pleasure from the female gaze, not only deconstruct the confines of the dominant
perception of sexual behaviour, but also make Parvati’s narrative, what Hélène Cixous
calls, “female sexed” or “volcanic” text:

“It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property
crust, carrier of masculine investments; there is no other way. There’s no room
for her if she’s not a he. If she’s a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to
shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth”
with laughter. (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 344)

Parvati’s narrative follows this course and gives another jolt to the dominant
perception of female behaviour by showing a woman’s (not man’s) non commitment in
man-woman relationship. In fact, vested with agency, Parvati is fully aware of the
dimensions of her relationship with Salman, and so, has never seen a future life with
him. She knows that their relationship is only “a shadow game”, “I had never suspected
Salman of permanence, I had known in our very first meeting that he was only a
shadow” (Shadows 30). What has bonded her with Salman was only some silent
physical hunger within her. That is why she feels neither hurt nor “diminished” at
Salman’s sudden departure like the drone from the town.

Like the honeybee, Parvati now takes fancy to a new flower and begins flirting
with Mukul, masterji’s favourite student. Exercising control on him, (again a subversion
of man-woman relationship) Parvati captivates him to indulge in her “absolute
adoration”, to wait upon her devotedly and employ ploys to be with her. However, she
herself finds more happiness in going to cinema with him and his close friend Lalit.
Though Mukul, (as recalled by him in his narration) has loved Parvati to distraction,
yearned for her proximity and has also desired to marry her, Parvati has displayed no
such yearning for him. Her liaison with Mukul has remained limited to stolen gazes,
kisses and visits. That is perhaps why, she shows no resistance when her uncle master
Hiranand marries her off to Lalit whose gotra and horoscope match with hers.
Moreover, her obligation to Masterji proves stronger than her feeling for Mukul, “He
[Masterji] had done his duty, and it was time for me to do mine” (32). Thus her
attraction towards Mukul, also, is a kind of sexual attraction based on bodily desire.
With Parvati’s wedding fixed to Lalit, her fictional journey takes a new twist by foregrounding more prominently the gender difference and its repressive impact on women. Though Gokhale, by adding a dash of gay politics, shows that men with non-heterosexual leanings like Lalit are also the victimized (in a society with heterosexuality perceived as the norm), yet the image of wifehood and consequent repression and suppression of women remain focalized in the text. The way Parvati’s marriage to Lalit is decided by Masterji (who considers himself liberal and modern-minded), without involving her in decision, reflects denial of control to women on their lives and bodies. It reflects double standards of patriarchal set up, which respects woman as mother but oppresses and represses her as daughter and wife. This kind of “socialization ensures the continuing dominance of male values over female ones” and also indicates that “violence in any form whether physical, verbal or attitudinal becomes the distinguishing and distinct character of a male in a patriarchal set up” (Hatimi, “Conflict and Violence” 197).

Married to Lalit, Parvati is shown a double victim—of the confines of a married hindu woman and of the repressive constraints of being the wife of a man with gay orientations. Lalit lets himself married to Parvati to maintain his image of a normal masculine man without thinking about Parvati’s need for physical intimacy. Parvati has to suffer mentally not because of deprivation of sexual satisfaction but also due to Lalit’s verbal and physical violence. This situation of Parvati reflects the oppressive state of women because of the image of wifehood, which expects them to pose to be happy in spite of suffocating and repressing marital relationship:

The wife who admits to outsiders that she is unhappy is throwing in the towel; a woman who has worked hard at being a wife for year on year has made an investment in her marriage that will be irrevocably lost the moment she admits defeat. (Greer, The Whole Woman 271)

Since Parvati is not as assertive as Gokhale’s other women are, Gokhale makes strategic use of the narrative technique of ambivalence. She portrays in Parvati a docile wife bearing her sexual starvation and husband’s violence, on the one hand; and an assertive woman defying and transgressing cultural codes, on the other hand. In fact, by naming
her protagonist Parvati after Lord Shiva’s consort and titling her narrative *A Himalayan Love Story*, Gokhale reinforces multilevel meanings and sets the text’s derisive tone against patriarchy. Whereas the mythical Parvati, being a willing wife, takes birth after birth to be with Lord Shiva and finds matrimonial bliss in the Himalayas (Lord Shiva’s abode); Gokhale’s Parvati, living in the times informed by feminist strivings, is portrayed as an unwilling and reluctant wife because of her repression and suppression in her husband’s home. However, she makes occasional efforts to fight this victimization in her own way.

Parvati’s submission to, as well as the defiance of the image of wifehood begins with her wedding night that proves to be a nightmare for her. Lalit, because of his gay orientations, shuns heterosexual union with her—“At night we slept beside each other on the narrow bed like hostile strangers” (34). And naturally, Parvati who had tasted “real passion” and “sexual bliss” with Salman feels depressed and scornful at this farce. However, instead of indulging in self-pity or verbal outburst, she uses her silence as an effective shield against “the cold hostility of our [their] nights together” (34) by encouraging nieces and nephews in the joint in-laws’ family to sleep in their room. Since the novel is made to say much more through suggestiveness, Gokhale makes a complex use of Parvati’s silence because “Silence does not necessarily mean the abandonment of a controlling position and speech does not automatically confer on the speaker a position of power” (Jain, “The Body in / of the Text” 193). So, sometimes, Parvati’s silence indicates her compromise for survival in patriarchal set up; at other times, it reveals her sneer for the patriarchal constructs; and still at other times, it becomes a powerful weapon of resistance to patriarchal control of women’s bodies.

This peaceful, private and silent strategy to come out of her emotional and sexual oppression turns into a more powerful revolt against Lalit’s hostility when Parvati and Lalit shift to Bareilly. Even the fact of their being alone fails to bring them closer emotionally. That is why Kuhu Chanana remarks that marriage provides Parvati neither sexual nor emotional gratification (165). Rather, she is subjected to violence—physical (in the form of a slap) and verbal (“prying whore”) — for opening Mukul’s letter. Ironically enough this letter is addressed to both of them “Mr & Mrs Lalit Joshi”. Lalit also gets her locked up as Parvati reveals to Mukul later on. This abusive treatment
of hers by Lalit reflects the sexist bias of gender politics which accords men a kind of ownership over their wives, because wives are women and husbands are men.

However, since Parvati is invested with agency, she displays her capacity to analyse the whole situation by linking Lalit’s hostility towards her to the comradeship between the three (Mukul, Lalit and herself) in the past happy days at Wee Nooke. She is wise enough to link this to Lalit’s gay orientations towards Mukul even during those days. This realization gets confirmed when she observes Lalit’s intense yearning and hunger for Mukul during Mukul’s visit to them in Bareilly— “The mask of lust sat taut upon his ordinary face; the telltale twitch near his mouth made him appear both pathetic and obscene” (36). Her detailed analysis of her present situation highlights not only her predicament, but also hints at her resolve to find some way out:

Nothing I knew or understood could have led me to put such a lewd construct on their noble and passionate friendship. But thirteen months of unfulfilled marriage, when I had lived like a prisoner of war, constantly spying on the habits and inclinations of my captor, had given me an instinctive understanding of my husband. I knew now with a sense of numbing finality that it was so, and so it would remain. (37)

By evaluating her position in relation to her husband, Parvati reflects her need and quest to redefine her identity. She realizes that in the given situation living within the self-imposed limits is the best option. Her act of sleeping separately from Lalit, firstly in the same room and then in the kitchen—“for the roaches and mice that lived there seemed less hostile than Lalit” (38)— reflects her agency. It also reflects her transgression of woman’s social confines as her next step towards selfhood. So, once again she uses silence as her weapon. She not only retreats into silence in relation to Lalit, but also in relation to the ‘honeybee’ within herself. Doing so, she not only challenges the notion of women’s fixed identity, but also reveals her control on her body and its desires.

However, still not fully out of her internalized subjugation, she does not step out of the confines of a hindu married woman— “I was a Hindu woman, a married woman— I would tenaciously live out the role, safely in stern intermitting code” (37). Despite no physical relationship with her husband, she nurtures the desire of
motherhood within the confines of her “neglected womb” as much as everybody in Lalit’s family waits for ‘the good news’. This situation of hers reflects how the interlinked images of wifehood and motherhood weigh heavily on women. It also reveals how women’s economic dependence on men aggravates their problems. This has been the case of Pravati’s widowed mother as well. Jeffery Weeks observes:

Female sexuality has been limited by economic and social dependence, by the power of men to define sexuality by the limitation of marriage, by the burdens of reproducing and by the endemic fact of male violence against women. At the same time, their contradictory definitions have as often provided the opportunity for women to define their own needs and desires. (Sexuality 29)

Since, woman is perceived to be an object of her husband’s desire (not only by society but by herself also), sexual indifference of her husband makes Parvati indifferent about her looks and dressing up. However, she tries to get empowerment on Lalit by cooking elaborate meals which he relishes, though without comments. Parvati’s words, “he earned for me, I cooked for him” (44) sum up the plight of all those women for whom marriage turns out to be matrimonial silence, violence, indifference, self-effacement and sexual repression. This attitude of Parvati reflects that the influence of patriarchal culture and image of wifehood is so deep rooted in women’s psyche that it slows down the process of transgression in spite of their desire for love and space in life. Parvati’s plight, thus, brings out the inequalities—absence of choice, overpowering claims of domestic duties, a persistent subordination, lack of economic independence—which marriage and wifehood impose on women.

However, Parvati, who has earlier tried various passive alternatives to fight her subjugation, now seeks to do so by transgressing dominant gender behaviour with vengeance. In fact the more oppressive the marriage and her relationship with Lalit become, the more resistant she becomes. Though she has earlier silenced and ignored her body hunger, yet with the passage of time, she finds this physical hunger too strong to resist. The honeybee within her returns—“An urgency invaded my body” (42). She does not mind having physical relationship outside marriage. She enjoys her nights with Mukul’s brother Raju during his short stay with them. Though Raju feels a bit ashamed,
yet Parvati feels no guilt “I felt safe with Raju… He was, after all, not a stranger, he was my husband’s brother, he was family” (40). This reflection also becomes a mockery of the role of family and relatives in a women’s subjugation, because Raju has been aware of his brother’s orientation even before their marriage.

The novel’s use of body as a site is reflected in portrayal of women’s sexuality from female perspective. That is why, Parvati’s sexual encounter with Raju is described through her gaze “I felt his cool skin against my face… Then, strangely, I was revived, resuscitated; boldly I reached out and held his hand… An urgency invaded my body” (42). It is this kind of portrayal of female sexuality which supports Hélène Cixous’s assertion “The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable” (“The Laugh” 341) and makes Parvati’s narrative move outside phallocentric discourse. The glowing and healthy impact of this sexual satisfaction on her— “this confident and happy woman I had mysteriously become” (44) – strangely enough, enables her to cope with and learn to love even Lalit. It also gives her hope to have a normal marriage with him. Her improved looks, happy mood and positive attitude—“I began combing my hair again, I hummed to myself as I washed the clothes…. the glow returned to my face” (43-44)—remind the similar situation of her mother (in relation to Shrikrishanji). This portrayal draws attention to the significance of sexual desire and its satisfaction in human life.

However, Gokhale’s intended complex plan of Parvati’s feminist narrative makes Gokhale accord Lalit a hasty death due to consumption. Nevertheless, Parvati’s sexual encounter with Raju marks the victory of her ‘self’ in the opposition between her role as a wife and the call of her body as a human. The ensuing pregnancy, about which she comes to know after Mukul’s death, gives her no guilt. Rather she embraces it as a challenge to patriarchal constructs—“I wept a lot, sometimes I screamed… sometimes I laughed without reason” (49). Continuing the double edged use—portrayal of prevalent as well as subversive images—of literature, the narrative of Parvati now depicts her as a widow, suffering as well as transgressing the compulsive widowhood prevalent in the dominant Hindu society. In the traditional setup, widows can’t think of remarriage (as in case of widowers, or in case of western women like Mukul’s wife Adeleine) and have to face various discriminatory practices. They are forced to live not only a life of deprivation and starvation but have to face the brunt of multiple patriarchies, consisting
of hierarchies of age and of relationships by marriage. Even family, instead of extending support, proves to be a restrictive and oppressive factor. And it is this negative role of family which the novel HLS portrays prominently.

Parvati’s oppressive plight as a widow is narrated to Mukul not only by Parvati herself but also by Jeewan and his brothers (in section II). Her oppressive and repressive state, because of her both families, reduces her to a physical wreck. She herself fails to recognize her face in the mirror, “It was an old face, a fat, haggard old face; it was not my face at all” (50). She has to undergo mental trauma as well, when people look at her with pity and concern “as though I were a sick animal or a stray dog” (50). Parvati’s condition is summed up by Mohan Mischief, “Parvati’s widowhood and breakdown had met with no compassion. She was abandoned… no one wanted to have anything to do with her suffering” (138). The suffocating social norms and the ill-treatment by members of her in-laws’ family— “No one would speak to me. They hate me… His sister used to talk about me. After he died I saw her spit into the tea she made for me” (181-82) —reflect the callous attitude of the family and the society towards widows, mainly due to their financial dependence on others.

Alienation from family and society leads these widows to neuroses and self-withdrawal and makes their lives unlivable. They are treated as a burden not only by their in-laws, but by their own relatives as well, as portrayed through Parvati’s plight. Abandoned by the in-laws, widowed Parvati is shifted to her Uncle Master Hiranand’s house where she delivers a daughter. However, her “brooding silence and increasing slovenly housekeeping” (138) is not liked by Masterji. Her daughter Irra is considered an additional burden. Parvati is sent back to her in-laws who in turn dispatch her to an asylum because they, too, find the economic burden of a widow and her child too much for them. Her condition becomes more deploring when after Masterji’s death, her own cousins and their families treat her inhumanly because of Masterji’s assets and property willed in Mukul’s and her favour. She is subjected to physical violence. Even Mukul notices, “Parvati had been brutally beaten up. Her face was a welter of bruises. Her left eye was swollen… one arm had been inexpertly bandaged and was held by an improvised sling…” (194). However, in spite of these physical injuries her face shows, “a smile of mysterious interaction with sorrow and acceptance” (197). It seems to
express her sneer for the relatives, who have thrown her and her daughter because of their economic dependence on them.

By raising this issue of women’s financial dependence again and again, the novel supports the need for women’s financial independence as a means to stop their subjugation. Moreover, by showing the indifferent and cruel attitude of Abha (wife of Parvati’s cousin) towards Parvati, the novel draws attention to the subtle working of patriarchal structures. These structures make women not only the oppressed one, but also the oppressors to keep the institution of patriarchy alive. In order to make Parvati represent the plight of millions of widowed women like her, Gokhale links her insanity / neurosis to her whole generation of women—“Mental illness runs like a secret rivulet through the genetic pools of Kumaon. No one is free from its visitations”(137). Thus, through portrayal of Parvati’s oppression as a wife and widow, Gokhale presents the devastating impact of social and sexual repression on women because of the interlinked images of wifehood and widowhood.

However, Gokhale’s feminist perspective enables Parvati to protest and transgress her social repression as well. After giving birth to a daughter—for Gokhale’s fictional worlds are usually daughters’ worlds—she begins taking interest in her personal grooming and takes up job as a Hindi teacher in a convent school to raise money for her daughter’s education. However, with patriarchal constructs and relatives’ evil designs proving stronger, Parvati is confined to a mental asylum. When the greedy relatives bring her out of the asylum to meet Mukul (who has apparently come to honour Masterji’s will), she displays quite sane behaviour in her interaction with him. Even Mukul comments “I suspected her sanity” (184). In fact, this mental disability seems to be imposed on her by her relatives to avoid shouldering responsibility of a widow and her daughter.

Rising above the submissive image of a window, Parvati displays self-assertion, instinct for survival and practical considerations about the future of her daughter and her own. Her conversation with Mukul reveals her analytical mind and ability to argue and guard her self-interest. Having learnt lessons from her bitter experiences—“You learn a lot in the madhouse… You certainly learn a lot. Perhaps we could save the legal
fees” (183)—she mocks at the ‘wise’ world run by patriarchal constructs as well as Mukul’s lack of action. She shows little interest in Mukul (who is revisiting Wee Nook to meet her and re-live his memories with her) and tells him, “give me the property and go” (183). Her subsequent act of examining the lines in her hands and labeling these as “An inquisitor’s hands” (184) reflect that in spite of her forced insanity, she is strong enough to be assertive and optimistic about future. Through these attitudes and acts of Parvati, the novel subverts the stereotyped image of a widow as a self-effacing and self-denying being.

This legacy of subversion of patriarchal constructs now passes from Parvati on to her teenage daughter Irra, who is wiser for her age. Her mother’s illness, anguish and their dependent status on Masterji’s disinherited family (for he dies after making his will in Mukul’s favour) make her a strong and confident girl. She is much more vocal, analytical and authoritative than her mother because of her embodied experiences as a dependant widow’s daughter. Her firm resolution about her career— “I don’t care where I live as long as I join the medical line” (110)— shows her individuality and self-assertion. Vested with agency, she has the capacity to analyse, think, decide and act. Having seen the ways and attitudes of Masterji’s greedy relatives, she warns Mukul to be cautious. However, at the same time, she is wise enough to judge Mukul and see through his cowardice and incapacity for action. She tells him authoritatively, “Why don’t you sort things out before you go?” (199). She not only chalks out the details of her medical career— “I will do my intermediate next year, and then I can give my pre-medical here, or in Allahabad” (200)— but calculates the costs and means to meet these as well. She asks Mukul (who knows that his choices have been made by her) to sell one property to meet the expenses of her mother’s needs and her own education. When Mukul asks her who would look after her mother, Irra replies confidently “I will”, and again to his next question as to who will look after her, she says “The money will” (200-201). This assertion, confidence and firm resolution on Irra’s part calls attention to feminists’ stress on empowering women through their self-awareness, education and economic self-dependence as a means to fight their subjugation, oppression and repression.
Since the novel HLS is different from Gokhale’s other novels because of its suggestiveness, Parvati’s oppression by women of the family, when compared with Gudiya’s bonding with Phoolwati (Gods, Graves and Grandmother), says much about the need for cultivating sisterhood among women to fight their oppression and subjugation. Parvati, during her study of honeybees’ behaviour, have observed the dance of the honeybee and followed it in her life by exploring her sexuality. She has perhaps not seen the “sisterhood” aspect of the bees—“Beehives and ant communities are full of sisters working side by side” (Greer, The Whole Woman 236). And her slow transgression of the patriarchal structures might be attributed to the lack of this bonding in her life. But then this slow process of transgression suggests the need for sisterhood in women’s fight against patriarchy for “men are afraid of women in groups” (Greer 243)

However, it is not only through three generations of women—Parvati, her mother and her daughter, that the novel HLS registers its protest against patriarchy. Even the brief sub-narratives of Mukul’s English wife Adeleine and a Tibetan girl Pasang Rampa interrogate dominant images of women through assertion of their sexuality and knack for survival in this world, which is hostile to women. Adeleine is described as “a very level-headed woman, with a strong sense of order and propriety” (136). Immediately after her widowhood, she is determined to provide for her daughter. Though the widow-remarriage is not a taboo in the western society, yet the way she uses her sexuality, to seduce Mukul to propose and get married to her, dismantles the stereotyped image of women. She is bold and assertive enough to address her daughter as “my daughter”. She dictates Mukul—“Return immediately, my daughter is ill (195) — who bows to her wish and goes back to her without settling the things for which he has come to India. This contrast in the behaviours of the two serves to strengthen the feminist perspective of the novel by portraying Adeleine (a woman) more assertive than Mukul (a man), and also by subverting the dominant image of a husband bossing over his wife.

In Mukul-Pasang Rampa relationship also, we find defiance of the dominant image of men and women. Pasang Rampa is shown as a woman of aspirations—“I do not want to sell shawls and scent bottles all my life!”(160). She does not mind using her sexuality to make Mukul help her settle in Hong Kong. On the other hand, Mukul’s lack of decisiveness and his attitude to the sexual act with Pasang Rampa subverts the
dominant image of man as rational and sexually assertive being. In spite of his hunger and lust for Pasang Rampa’s body, Mukul feels a sense of shame and guilt—“I am dying, I do not exist, I have, left myself to enter her… and my spirit? It is shamed… Her nakedness fills me with horror…” (186).

In fact, Mukul (representing dreams of reason) turns out to be unreasonable on all fronts. He lacks the capacity to think, decide and act and leaves for his family abroad, without fulfilling his responsibility towards his love Parvati, her daughter Irra and his mentor Master Hiranand. With no seriousness of purpose and will to act, he considers their case also to be a formal, official file which he closes without taking action. His failure is rightly symbolized by the futility of the severed head of the heifer at the alter “No one had been appeased, no one seemed propitiated” (206). The final laughter at patriarchy is reflected through confident, decisive and assertive Irra’s act of gifting dead Masterji’s grinning dentures to indecisive and non-performer Mukul.

To strengthen the derisive tone of the narrative against patriarchy, Gokhale presents subversive images of men even through the portrayal of other male characters—Lalit, his brother Raju and Master Hiranand. Lalit lacks courage to confess his gay leanings towards Mukul and hence, makes his own life and Parvati’s life unlivable. Like Lalit, his brother Raju too, lacks courage to act. He can have sex with Parvati but shirks responsibility for his act when the situation arises after Lalit’s death. Since he has been fully aware of his brother’s gay sexual orientations, he knows that Parvati has got impregnated from him. Though he shows guilt and repugnance when he meets Parvati, yet lacks the courage to own his responsibility and support Parvati. However, in resonance with the derisive tone of the narrative against patriarchy, Parvati is made to laugh at the “cosmic comedy” of male subjugative silence and indifference. Master Hiranand Joshi, Parvati’s uncle and caretaker, is an example of the double moral standards. Though the principal of a school and an admirer of European ideology and system, he acts contrary to what he professes. No doubt, he takes care of Parvati’s education, yet he decides her marriage strictly on the basis of caste and horoscope-matching. His non-sympathetic treatment of the widowed Parvati and her daughter reveals the typical patriarchal mindset beneath the seeming liberal educationist. Thus,
almost all male characters in the novel have been portrayed either as quitters or drones as compared to the assertive and active women.

To conclude, through the portrayal of three generations of women (Parvati’s mother, Parvati and her daughter Irra), Adeleine, Pasang Rampa and negative images of men, Gokhale interrogates patriarchal images repressing and suppressing women’s social as well as sexual identity. By portraying the effects of repressive sexuality, oppressively compulsive widowhood and society’s hostile attitude towards women (especially widows), Gokhale emphasizes the need for gender-free morality code. Moreover, through the self-assertion of these women, the novel also stresses on the need to look at the world and women with a woman’s gaze. No doubt, Parvati’s journey is not a journey for perfection and lacks the strong self-assertion of Gokhale’s other fictional women, yet it questions the gender biased dominant patriarchal thinking. It also supports the feminist cry for granting liberty and space to women and making them economically self-dependent to end their subjugation. Her narrative journey also makes visible the prevalent sexual difference and sexist bias by showing how in patriarchal structures, the victim (the oppressed) is always the woman— as a child, a wife, a mother and a widow— and most of the times, patriarchy works through patriarchal women (the oppressors). Moreover, by portraying a parallel between sexually active and desiring women and the queen honeybee on the one hand, and between men (Pahari men, Mukul, Salman and Raju) and drones on the other hand, Gokhale attempts to construct an alternative reality favouring the feminist cause.

From this analysis of the portrayal of women’s repressed and suppressed sexuality and oppressed identity (because of the images of wifehood / widowhood) and their subversion in the novel *A Himalayan Love Story*, the next chapter takes us to an analysis of the body as a site to gain power and selfhood through sexuality in relation to Gokhale’s two novels *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *Priya in Incredible Indyaa*. The chapter would also analyse how these novels try to construct alternative images of women as assertive, active and desiring bodies.