Chapter — 6

Journeying Out and Within: Body as a Means of Self-realization (*Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*)

“We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 338).

Namita Gokhale’s fifth novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2005) with its gripping, ambitious and complex narrative— a result of her painstaking research of years— is a significant milestone in her growth as a novelist. It is because the novel skillfully interweaves not only history with myth and religion, but also the physical and worldly issues with the metaphysical queries about the self, life and death by using the backdrop of emerging Buddhism and Adi Sankracharya’s efforts to contain this growing influence. Majority of critics and reviewers have either acknowledged the novel for its blending of history, myth and religion or hailed it as a tragic tale. Madhuri Moharil calls the novel “a hypnotic read” due to its “intriguing interplay of history and myth, suffused with profound metaphysical queries about the self” (“Writing on the Wall” 135). R. Krithika reviews the novel in *The Hindu* as “mixture of exotica and erotica”. Anita Nair in her review looks upon Gokhale’s Shakuntala as “a charming, shrewd and pathetic woman of tragic integrity” like Marilyn Monroe and “the whore who is ruled by shame”.

However, a feminist reading of the novel reveals that one of the major concerns of the novel is the significance and centrality of body in the wholeness of a woman’s human existence—“The body needs to be recognized with all its desires and unconscious drives as much as the feelings and thoughts which inhabit human mind” (Jain, *Indigenous Roots* 5). Exploring the selfhood of a woman and questioning the traditional perception of the self as a unified and static subject, the novel attempts what Donald Hall calls, to re-write Descartes’s *Cognito* as “*We think... and rethink... and therefore we are*” (*Subjectivity* 130). In this venture, the novel problematizes body as a site not only for exploring a woman’s sexuality within and outside marriage, but also
for journeying out and within in the quest for self. Doing so, the novel tries to “inscribe
the breath of the whole woman” in place of “the castrated” woman (Cixous 338). This is
what Gokhale calls portrayal of alternative realities:

But a novelist or a creative writer tries to create alternative realities. The reasons
for creating alternative realities are usually that they are not satisfied with the
one that they encounter. They also love the feeling of playing the god of their
own little creations. (Interview by Banerjee).

Nevertheless the focus of the novel Shakuntala is also on presentation of alternative
realities or feminist image of women. In this attempt the novel uses body as a site.
Nevertheless, to foreground the alternative images, the novel also portrays the image
of castrated woman through Shakuntala’s gendered expeireices during various phases of
her life. In fact, by portraying the physicality of a woman’s life ranging from girlhood,
puberty, motherhood (pregnancy) to death, the novel depicts life-long subjugation of
women. The narrative consists of twenty (20) plus two chapters (O and OO) and is
woven around Shakuntala (namesake of Kalidas’s Shakuntala) and is recounted in the
voice of her spirit. Vested with agency, Shakuntala is portrayed as an assertive woman.
She does not think twice before giving up the comforts of a settled married life to obey
the call of her heart and body by going away with a stranger to the new lands, and then
leaving him too, to satiate her spiritual quest on the ghats of Kashi. She is shown
asserting her ‘self’ not only as an embodied being, but also as a battling spirit who dares
to challenge even death— “she [goddess Kali] would have me, but not before I had
traveled upriver” (Shakuntala 197).

Through Shakuntala’s thoughts and acts, the novel challenges patriarchal
paradigms which by confining women to the images of wifehood and motherhood bind
them to strict codes of morality. These images also debar them from intellectual and
spiritual pursuits. It is in this context that the novel might be called to express “a
collective anguish and misery borne of the weight of expectations carried by Indian
women and their submission and self-erasure” (Kaul, Review). Jasbir Jain observes:

Women have, in almost all cultures through the agencies of law, philosophy and
religion, through Manu and Aristotle, been excluded from a participation in the
formations of morality. Male discourses have stressed rationality and have ruled that women are irrational. (*Indigenous Roots* 287)

These rules of morality and concepts about rationality and gender roles prescribed by patriarchy and inscribed on female bodies have led to, what Germaine Greer calls, “desexualization of women” (*The Eunuch* 78). Ironically enough, in spite of women being equated with body in the dominant discourse, they have to remain silent about the desires of their body. It is because this dominant discourse, by equating sexuality with male sexuality, focuses on male sexual initiative and pleasure, and reduces women to passive objects to cater to male satisfaction. Moreover, it has not only made women’s sexuality a hidden continent but has also subjected women to various cross-cultural practices to control and tame their bodies. Varying from culture to culture and time to time, these practices include forced genital mutilation, chastity belts, stoning of ‘immodest’ women, female contraceptives, sterilization, cosmetic surgery, prostitution, pornography, sexual abuse, elaborate beauty rituals and code of conduct and morality. Any deviation from these culturally set norms of morality and sexuality is enough to label a woman a fallen woman, a whore or a pervert. It is this aspect to which Hélène Cixous draws attention, when she says, “we’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 342).

To strengthen and perpetuate its control on women’s bodies and sexuality, patriarchy has not only trapped women in a web of interlinked images of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood, but has also used the authority of religion, law and family. Consequently, women are never “off duty” and, says Dorothy I Riddle, “are expected to (and expect themselves to) accommodate continuously to others’ needs and preferences” and have little time for “their own self-care and sense of self” (6). Thus, expected to bask in the glory of perceived womanly virtues of compassion, self-sacrifice, self-negation and self-denial, women have further been debarred from pursuing the call of intellect, mind and soul. This patriarchal construction of imaginary bodies is so deep-rooted in our social and psychological structures that it has come to be perceived natural and universal even by women themselves. It makes women not only to submit willingly to these practices, but also to contribute to the perpetuation of
patriarchy by passing on these values to their children (through their different attitude towards male and female children). It is this oppressive operation of the gender system which writers like Gokhale intend to demolish by writing through body or using body as a site. Doing so, they not only portray the dominant difference between women and men but also try to present alternative reality by blurring the perceived difference between gender roles and codes of morality and sexuality.

Another dimension of feminism explored by Gokhale in this novel is, what has come to be known as feminist spirituality. This is an area of feminism which attempts to counter dominant perception of women as spiritually inferior to men by revising and reinterpreting religious practices, conventions and scriptures from a feminist perspective. It believes “there can be no feminist transformation of our culture without a transformation in our religious beliefs” (hooks, Feminism is for Everybody 106). No doubt, feminism has been, till recent years, taking an anti-religion stand because of its organized and fundamentalist religious practices to subjugate women. These practices have not only helped patriarchy to make the inequality between sexes appear natural, but have also encouraged the need to control female body. However, an overall cultural shift towards new age spirituality, notes Bell hooks in her essay “Feminist Spirituality”, has led to the rise of “liberatory spirituality” (106). Different from “institutionalized system” of dogmas and rituals, this spiritually implies, says Dorothy I. Riddle “our personal understating of ourselves… and our purpose as humans in this vast cosmos”. It encompasses our world view, i.e. “how we view ourselves and each other, what traits we value, how we define “success”, how we assume we learn, and how we view change” (“Feminist Spirituality” 2-3). Under the impact of this trend, many people are developing a liberal attitude towards religion. They do not even mind turning to different religious and spiritual traditions to seek answers to queries about life and death. Moreover, these alternative religious traditions (like Hinduism and Buddhism) with their veneration of female deities and ‘Shaktin’ tradition—faith in female power—have offered new positive images and symbols of female empowerment to feminists. That is perhaps why, Gokhale makes extensive use of the myths and concepts related with Hinduism and Buddhism in the novel Shakuntala. Bell hooks calls these religious
traditions “feminist-affirming spiritual traditions”, which are offering a challenge to the fundamentalist patriarchal religion. She observes:

Feminist spirituality created a space for everyone to interrogate outmoded belief systems and created new paths... Identifying liberation from any form of domination and oppression as essentially a spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation. (*Feminism is for Everybody* 109)

It is this spiritual dimension of feminism and its linkage with the feminist call of writing through the body that make Gokhale’s novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* a distinct work. Using body as a site the novel explores Shakuntala’s journey from the world of patriarchal control to a world of liberation and self-realization. The novel also challenges the monolithic, unitary and totalitarian patriarchal image of women and affirms, to quote Shakuntala’s monk-brother Gurusvera, “The question of truth has to be constantly addressed according to the changing temper of times” (*Shakuntala* 77). In fact, this deconstruction of patriarchal ‘truths’ and images, and their replacement by feminist images form a significant aspect of women writing— “Images are created by social processes, their destabilization is both an important prelude as well as significant fallout of the whole process of imaging” (Jain, *Across Cultures* 21). Following this precept, the novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* attempts to redefine the body/woman. It does so not only by reevaluating the significance of sex, love and freedom in a woman’s life, but also by emphasizing the need of women’s agency to empower them to exercise control on their lives and bodies. So, vesting Shakuntala with agency i.e. a strong will to learn, decide and act, the novel makes her use her embodied experiences to transgress fixed gender roles and rules.

In order to execute the complex and ambitious outlay of the novel, Gokhale uses various modernist and post modernist devices and textual strategies like myths, flashbacks, memories, verses, comments by characters and intertextual referencing. Pre-announcing the gist of the narrative in the opening chapter titled ‘O’, the novel also makes ample use of the technique of internal focalization, which consists of presenting the narrative through “the vantage point of an individual participant in the story-world”
(Herman 58). However, in chapters like (O, 2O and OO) it also makes use of ‘figural narration’ i.e. “blending first person and third person narration” (Herman 140). The narrative makes an abundant use of discourse resources like tense-shifts and time frame shifts. It is probably due to two reasons. Firstly, the novel is about memories and so the narrative has to alternate between past, present and future. Further, Gokhale believes in “the simultaneous coexistence of time frames” which she explains—“the past is a fluid, plastic entity which is capable of being imaginatively penetrated” (Mountain Echoes 9).

However, what makes the narrative unique and contributes most to the making of Shakuntala’s narrative a narrative of challenge is the sustained and systematic use of the myth of Kalidas’s Shakuntala as a counter narrative to the advantage of feminism.

The very title of the novel, the use of Raja Ravi Verma’s painting on the cover of the book, the use of quotations from M.A. Sherring’s book *Benaras : The Sacred City of the Hindus* (1868) and Kalidas’s verse from *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as prologue, the name of the main character, the details of Kashi in the opening chapter (O), the recital (in chapter 2) and then the dramatic enactment of Kalidasa’s play (in chapter 13) establish a direct correlation between both Shakuntalas. Moreover, Gokhale portrays her Shakuntala as a reincarnation of Kalidas’s Shakuntala—“Shakuntala died here, by the banks of the sacred river… Yet I find no release” (Shakuntala1) and “she will not leave me, that Shakuntala. I carry her pain and the burden of loves”(2). And then the narrative progresses by comparing and contrasting and sometimes by merging both Shakuntalas and their memories. However, the subversion of the dominant discourse on woman and her body begins in the opening chapter itself—“my namesake was not a mortal like me” (6)—thereby implying that Gokhale’s Shakuntala is subject to patriarchal codes of behaviour of the world of mortals.

To appreciate the feminist stance of Gokhale’s novel it becomes pertinent to have a look at Kalidas’s Shakuntala. Written presumably between 300 A.D. to 500 A.D., Kalidas’s Shakuntala obviously, supports the values prevalent in those times. Like other male-constructed myths, Kalidas’s Shakuntala, represents those patriarchal images “which render women secondary and which depict them in restricted role models” by reinforcing “inequalities and discrimination” (Jain, *Across Cultures* 21). R. D. Karmarkar observes that in her Shakuntala, Kalidas wanted to depict “unsophisticated
girl of his own times… in the three phases of her career—as a daughter as an ardent lover and as a mother… an ornament to both the families, the mother of heroes, and highly esteemed of the husband” (124-125). So, Kalidas’s drama, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is written through male gaze. It opens with focus on king Dushyant, a man, whose chase of a speeding dear turns into chase of a woman, Shakuntala—portrayed as an object of his desire and love:

She can be a warrior’s bride

Since my truest soul desires her. (207)

and

First may I, thirsting, gently drink,

Fair maid, the nectar of your lip,

As the bee sips the honeyed juice

Of tender, fresh untainted bids. (229)

Portrayed as a docile, meek and passive object, this Shakuntala displays no anger, no resentment even when Dushyant refuses to recognize her. Meekly accepting the loss of king’s memory as her fate, she busies herself bearing and rearing the scion to Dushyant’s race in Sage Kashyap’s hermitage. Again, after the spell of Durvasa’s curse is over, she willingly submits to the wish of her lord and her destiny and leaves with the king—“Be of good cheer, my heart! Destiny is appeased and takes pity on you” (276). Thus remaining within the confines of patriarchal paradigms, she glorifies the image of wifehood and motherhood (mother of sons) and a docile and coy woman.

On the contrary, written in the 21st century under the impact of feminist call to write through body, Gokhale’s Shakuntala represents a different perspective. She attempts to, what Elaine Showalter calls, “free ourselves from the linear absolute of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (“Towards a Feminist Poetics” 172). Challenging the sexist bias of Kalidas’s myth, Gokhale’s narrative assigns subject position to a woman and focalizes Shakuntala’s “play of memory”, thoughts, fears, hopes, choices, desires and intra personal relations. Pushing the men in her life to the periphery, the text foregrounds Shakuntala’s (a woman’s) sensuality and
sexuality by presenting her as a gazer and chaser instead of being the gazed and the chased one. Details of her memory of various men encountered by her mark the insertion of female gaze into the text. Recalling the memories of her husband Srijan she says, “she knows every hair on this chest, the way it curls, how it flattens before her embrace” and about her Greek lover, “… a stocky muscular man, a traveller with irresponsible merriment in his eyes”. Then she records observation about the blind priest on the ghat, “… but he wears only a limp cotton dhoti. The sacred thread is turned across his naked chest— He has flabby breasts and large, sightless eyes” (Gokhale, Shakuntala 2-4). Shakuntala is presented as a gazer even in relation to her first secret love, her brother’s tutor, “I stared at him in fascination. He had grey curly hair and an oily face” (17) and the naked holy man with matted locks on the ghats of Kashi, “He was taller than Nearchus or Srijan… He was extremely fair-chinned, and the dark hair on his body stood out in sharp contrast. His penis, his lingam… stood erect and engorged, like a flagstaff on a limb of wood” (182). Thus by giving priority to physical description of men from a woman’s gaze, the novel subverts the dominant perception of the female body as an object of desire, and progresses to establish itself as a narrative of the body by challenging patriarchal practices.

It has been observed that the dominant patriarchal practices begin to train female bodies to be ‘feminine’ right from infancy by making them dress up in frilly-fragile dresses and subjecting their physical movements to control. Though Shakuntala is also subjected to the control, yet she refuses to be limited by, what Iris Marion Young calls, “the typical situation of being a woman in a patriarchal society” (“Throwing like a Girl” 165). Cast in the feminist mould, Shakuntala belongs to that category of women who believe, “there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (Woolf, A Room of One’s Own 76). Born to a rugged hill woman and a vaidya father, she spends her childhood among hills but displays no inhibited intentionality of by a stereotyped girl. Resisting her mother’s efforts to train her in conventional household chores, she steals her joys. Roaming in the hills and forests till late in the evening, she learns her first lessons of restlessness, independence, wanderlust and risk-taking by watching the hawks the eagles, the clouds, the rain and the thunder, “I was always cautious, though, and kept to the pathways and clearings… was restless to see
the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds (8-9). Her resistance to and rebel against the patriarchal control of her mother is reflected in her violent anger and hateful attitude towards her— “I hated everything about my mother, from her tangled hair to her scuffling gait and her cracked, dirty feet.” She adds “I did not ever want to become like her” (8). Shakuntala displays agency and resistance by making her own little choices even as a child and that too with full awareness of the risks involved and the consequences of her acts. She would usually indulge in running contrary to the flow of the river water along the narrow cliff— “I loved the edge of danger in this play; I knew well what could happen if I tumbled the other way” (9). Her acts of comforting her elder brother (against his fears, anxieties and doubts) and her caring about a younger brother (a differently born child) show Shakuntala rising above the gender roles even as a child. Seen as a protector rather than as the protected, her character displays women’s desire to break free from the domestic domain.

Since, writing through body also implies portraying the prevalent gender difference (to subvert it later), Gokhale uses subtle but obvious instances to portray how the female body is subjected to various discriminating and subjugating practices. Shakuntala has been paying the price of being born with a female body since her childhood. Her mother, always worried about her son, his education and training in scriptures, displays biased attitude towards Shakuntala. She forbids Shakuntala (in spite of her keener eagerness and ability to learn) even from listening to the scriptures or “else you [she] will grow a moustache and no one will marry you [her] (19). Similarly, she threatens Shakuntala not to go out of the house by telling “bears were known to carry away young girls and take them as their wives” (22). Thus the novel portrays how patriarchy, with its various taboos and restrictions imposed on female bodies, hammers the image of wifehood on them right form childhood. Further under the impact of biological constructionism even the biological functioning (like menstruation) of female body has been made to appear a cause of shame and self-loathing. In fact, portrayal of this phase is taken up by Gokhale in her novel Gods, Graves and Grandmother too. If Gudiya has to face the verbal and emotional distancing of her grandmother because of her onset of periods; Shakuntala has to face the wrath of her own mother who retorts, “Have you no modesty, girl! ...Defiling the household fires when a holy man is visiting
us. You are a woman now, you had better understand what that implies!” (31). Instead of being treated lovingly, Shakuntala is dragged and confined to the cowshed. Ignorant of this biological function of the female body, she reflects on her helplessness, “I lay on a pile of hay and grass, wondering what I had done wrong… I felt possessed by blind, flapping panic… I had been abandoned; I would bleed to death while my brother and his proud guru were piled with jaggery sweets (31).

This loveless and callous attitude of Shakuntala’s mother towards her reflects the interiorized inferiority of women. It makes women not only submit to their domination, but also to become willing partners in the perpetuation of patriarchal subjugation by passing on these values to their children. In the context of the Indian society, it reflects not only preference for a male child over the girl child, but also the discriminatory treatment given to the girl child. However, what gains significance from the feminist perspective is Shakuntala’s sensitivity and maturity in seeing through the working of patriarchy. Her awareness of her victim status and her anger at gender difference mark her first step towards self-liberation. Revolting against the curbs on female body, she acts the ‘male’ way and walks away from her home towards forests. There she comes across a rock demoness through whose brief portrayal Namita Gokhale interrogates the horrifying image of the witch (again persecution of female body) imposed on women. Jasbir Jain mentions, “Persecution as a witch closes all doors upon her and it is usually the people in power who do it—often to camouflage and hide their own sins” (Indigenous Roots 170). Accused of stealing and many times killing the cattle of the village folk, this rock demoness has been subjected to violent treatment by the village menfolk— “They pulled her by the hair and stoned her…. They tore up her clothes and spat on her face” (32)— and is forced to stay out of the village. Her telling Shakuntala— “I am a woman… though the villagers think me a sorceress” (36)— not only becomes a mockery of the patriarchal oppression of women, but also establishes an immediate sisterhood with Shakuntala who, too, is a victim of patriarchy.

Since the novel Shakuntala uses body as a site to challenge patriarchal practices, the demoness makes Shakuntala look at and treat her body from a feminist perspective. She motivates her to accept her body as it is—“You have been blessed… I see the blood goddess has begun her sacred visitations on your body” (34). With this advice, the
demoness becomes a feminist medium to extol the women to celebrate their ‘femaleness’ and accept their bodies as they are. This need for transformation in women’s perception is symbolized by her leading Shakuntala to a stream and making her to have a bath in it. She extols her to arise and transform herself to fight against oppression. Invoking various images of the goddess (Kalika, Raudri, Jagat Ambika), the ‘demoness’ explains the strengths and potentialities of female body and stresses on the need for reinventing women’s multiple identities. Thus she questions the patriarchal singular identity of women and stresses upon the strategy of changing one’s identity according to the need of situation:

Sometimes the goddess drips blood from her fangs,… At other times she is a woman of beauty— her glances are her arrows, her eyebrows her bow; fragrant oils are her armour, her desire her chariot. Remember that in every one of her forms the goddess is always Swamini, mistress of herself. (35)

Though, Shakuntala does not realize the full significance of these words then, but these words sow the “first seeds of self-destruction” within her and pave her way to ‘dying’, arising and reinventing herself in her journey towards self-realization on different occasions in accordance with her changing priorities. The parting words of the demoness to Shakuntala— “you must be strong, Shakuntala. There is little place in the world for strong women, but none for the weak” (36)— serve to echo the feminist clarion call to women to rise above their dominantly perceived image as docile, passive and “leaky” bodies. At the same time, it links the narrative with libratory/feminist spirituality by looking upon goddess as the image of female strengths. This perspective-altering encounter between Shakuntala and the demoness also stresses on the role of sisterhood (based on equality) as a significant tool to fight against the patriarchal authority (based on hierarchal difference)— a theme taken up prominently by Gokhale in her novel Gods, Graves and Grandmother through the bonding between Phoolwati and Gudiya.

Shakuntala’s journey towards self-realization, which has so far been marked by her awareness of her victim status and limitations, moves forward to become an awareness of her strengths as well. She knows what to do and not to do in a particular
situation. Aware of the patriarchal restraints on women, she keeps her opinions to herself on some occasions—“for they were neither asked nor valued” (11)—even though she knows much more than her brother (a man) who “chose to see only what he wanted to” (74). With a keen sense of observation, curiosity, assimilation and eklavayian focus, Shakuntala misses no chance to learn and educate herself in grammar, philosophy, Vedas, Shastras, Sutras, Sanskrit dramas and verses by eavesdropping whenever her brother is being given lessons by his tutor. However, for this she has to bear repeated scolding of her mother, who tells her not to fancy herself a scholar as the scriptures are forbidden to women. Detesting all these patriarchal limitations imposed on her by her mother and finding marriage to be the only respite in the given situation, she lets herself be the third bride of Srijan. Though Srijan, seemingly, does not impose wifely curbs on her—“I enjoyed a rare degree of freedom for our times (41)—and she also enjoys love-making with him; yet Shakuntala is wise enough to see through the closed patriarchal structures represented by wifehood and she questions these from time to time.

Shakuntala’s resistance to the image of wifehood imposed on women’s bodies begins on her wedding night itself. She refuses to submit to husband’s absolute control on her body and to double standards of morality. She pretends not to sight the Arundhati star when Srijan guides her to see it and be like it. He tells her that it is the emblem of fidelity and that he would be guiding her towards the vision of right and wrong and thus assets a husband’s control of her wife’s body and life. More than ornaments and valuable gifts, Shakuntala takes interest in listening to Srijan’s tales of the lands visited by him. These tales further whet her curiosity and hunger for experience—“A man’s equal in bed, why could I not desire what men enjoyed: the freedom to wander, to be elsewhere, to seek, and perhaps find … something?” (48). She surprises Srijan by telling “true love had no philosophy but the joy that gave it sustenance” (41) in their casual conversation about love during a love-making session. Even Srijan acknowledges her distinctness from the stereotyped image of a wife and says, “you are an odd woman.. you do not care for ornaments or rich garments or a man’s flattering words” (49-50).
In fact, like Ashapurna Devi’s Suvaranlata, Shakuntala realizes, how women “falsify their real selves and are never able to discover their own true nature”. Commenting on the motive behind the patriarchal practice of bringing women precious ornaments, Suvaranlata says:

Fools, Fools. Women are the greatest fools. They don’t realize how they are being moulded. They think—oh, how valuable I am. He loves me. He worships me, he brings me ornaments.

My body is place for gold to find a storehouse—she doesn’t think that this decoration is an advertisement of his pleasure, she doesn’t realize that she pleases him with her clothes and jewellery and get charmed by his expression of love. (351-352)

Though Shakuntala, by not caring for ornaments, defies the stereotyped image of wifehood, yet she finds it difficult to come out of the impact of the interlinked image of motherhood. This is reflected in her deep desire to get pregnant—“I who had teats that gave no milk whose udders had no calves to comfort” (90). She tells the village priest—“It is a child I want” (102). Whenever she is visited by ‘ritu’ (menstruation) every month, she feels despair at her failed conception—“I was more deeply defeated than I had ever been before… I was doomed to be barren” (90). Her agony is somewhat similar to the plight of the narrator Handmaid in Margaret Atwod’s The Handmaid’s Tale, “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own” (83). In fact, in almost every culture, the patriarchal system looks upon female body as a means of reproduction and “a barren body is relegated to the status of unwoman and thus totally annihilated as a person” (Jain, Across Culture 63). Indian cultural attitude towards barrenness is echoed in the chief priest’s words to Shakuntala, “The field of your body resists your master’s plough” (Shakuntala 51). These words reflect the dominant patriarchal mindset. Even when the fault lies with man, it is woman who is blamed for childlessness. Here it is Srijan, who has failed to impregnate his earlier two wives as well. However, considering Shakuntala to be responsible and moreover, for camouflaging his own lack he seeks shelter in religious rituals.
No doubt, Shakuntala herself is in the grip of the image of motherhood, yet she does not like to be treated as a passive body. She realizes that Srijan needs her as an object of his sexual satisfaction and a means to bear him children. It is because on many occasions he does not care about her sexual satisfaction. So, she tries to defy this male control of her female body by participating unwillingly in ‘aganicayana’ rituals and prayers organized for seeking sons by Srijan. To subvert the dominant image of wifehood further, Shakuntala displays strong sexual desire— “All night I lay hungry for my husband’s rightful love” (54) and “I had not been with him for ten nights” (55). It is she (a woman) who feels perturbed at being denied sexual fulfillment by her husband. Her sexual desire becomes stronger after Srijan comes back from his travel alongwith a woman Kamalini. Shakuntala recalls:

Obsessed by our night-games, I set about seducing my husband, shuddering and moaning like a harlot, writhing and turning. My yoni was the one part of my body which was still alive, all pain, joy and hope concentrated in that one orifice… I wanted desperately to kindle my husband’s body, steal his strength, own and possess power over him”. (88)

Since Shakuntala is written through body to interrogate the dominant fixed image of women as incapable of intellectual and spiritual pursuits, the novel intermingles the physical issues with the metaphysical ones. By making Shakuntala explore questions about life, death, pain, attachment and detachment, the narrative seems to support what has come to be called “liberated spirituality”. Based on androgynous perspective, this concept of spirituality acknowledge no distinction between male and female and considers spiritual issues to be a significant aspect of our worldview. However, these issues remain, what Dorothy I. Riddle calls, “unquestioned until we experience persons with a completely different perspective… or we have a personal crisis…” (“Feminist Spirituality” 2). That is why the buddhist bhikkuni’s call “Arise. Commence a new life” coupled with the rock demoness’s advice to Shakuntala to be “her own Swamini” and her friend Kundan’s advice to be one with the fish and water become Shakuntala’s guiding force in her spiritual quest as well. She wonders, “What do we live for? Why do we die? To run away, always to run away, from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river ever slake its waters?” (3).
Reflecting about Srijan’s mother (whom she has never seen and who has left a husband, a young son and her home to become a Buddhist nun), Shakuntala wonders “what was she searching for, why did she go away?” (43). She not only yearns within for that freedom herself but also thinks, “Why some things had to be one way rather than another, why a twig on the sacrificial fire must point to the right rather than the left, why a woman who was menstruating was unclean, why games had to have rules?” (42). Thus, by interrogating the organized patriarchal religious practices and the discriminatory attitude towards women, Shakuntala’s fictional journey becomes a journey towards “liberatory spirituality” or “feminist spirituality” as well. That is why she is tormented by the idea of men not allowing women to be “too assertive”. Her own elder brother Gursuera (a recluse now) tells her that men felt “it led to disorder, and disorder… is never the true state.” (77-78). She again wonders, “Surely Shiva needed Shakti as Shakti needed Shiva? Women’s blood, women’s wombs, why did the priest fear them so much?”(78). Here the writer’s voice seems to be merging with that of Shakuntala to bring the issue of men’s fear of female body and their consequent manipulation to curb it. Jasbir Jain comments in this context, “women were oppressed not because they were considered inferior, but because they were considered powerful” (Across Cultures 26).

It is Shakuntala’s power of questioning, doubting and resisting certainties and rules which gradually helps Shakuntala to reinvent and alter her subjectivity, a significant step in the quest for the self. But then, this journey towards the self is not easy. It is marked by her various traumatic and contradictory attitudes and acts, a significant phase in the process of selfhood. Catherine Belsey notes, “the subject is thus, the site of contradiction and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction…. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation” (“Constructing the Subject” 597). For Shakuntala, this process of selfhood involves more contradictions because of her aspirations at various levels—physical, mental and spiritual.

So, Shakuntala’s assertion of subjectivity or selfhood becomes for her not only a struggle between the emotional and the physical, the societal and the individual but also an assertion of her sexuality and spiritual aspirations. For this she has to defy and
transgress various patriarchal images imposed on female body. So, unlike the stereotyped wife, she is not ready to accept silence of the strangers settling over her marital relationship. She is wise enough to see through her husband’s betrayal when he brings home a woman, named Kamalini, (purportedly to be Shakuntala’s hand maiden) from his travel. Feeling hurt and betrayed, Shakuntala once again seeks refuge in the sacred chamber of Matrika (symbolizing feminine principle) temple. To her pleasant surprise, her husband Srijan reaches there in search for her, and both of them indulge in intense love-making (after a long time) leading to her impregnation. Significantly, this use of a religious space for the fulfillment of bodily and emotional desires draws attention to the need for recognizing co-existence of the physical and the metaphysical in relation to women as well. Further, keeping with the feminist perspective of the text, Gokhale gives a new perception to motherhood by making Shakuntala long for her to-be-born child to be a daughter.

However, (till the chapter 9 of the narrative), Shakuntala in spite of her curious and interrogating mind and adventurous spirit, is shown tied to the role and position assigned to the female body by patriarchy. But since feminist perspective of the narrative demands a new and different Shakuntala, Shakuntala—the wife of mighty and wealthy Samant Srijan— has to ‘die’ and to be ‘reborn’. She has to awake and arise as a different and assertive Shakuntala to recommence her journey towards selfhood. She has to be shown in the subject position as opposed to the object position of mythical Shakuntala. For this, she is portrayed not as the abandoned wife but as the abandoning wife—who abandons wifehood in favour of selfhood. No doubt, she has been asserting herself since childhood, yet the feminist framework of the narrative requires her to be more assertive and decisive to make her explore territories (sexual, geographical and spiritual) forbidden to women.

So here, Gokhale makes clever use of the narrative strategy of dislocating Shakuntala from her home and throws her into a world free of social constructs and constraints through her encounter with Nearchus, a Greek traveller. Gokhale makes Shakuntala visit a holy temple, situated midst the Narbada river, to pray for her unborn child. At this narrative point, Shakuntala takes full control of her life and becomes her own ‘Swamini’. Though carried in a palanquin and accompanied by Kamalini, she
decides to walk alone to the temple. The serene environment (a contrast to the oppressive environment at home) not only fills her with joy but also fuels the rebellious and free spirit within her. She discards her silver anklets (symbol of patriarchal control of women’s bodies) on the shore and feels free. But since the agency now lies with her, she says, “I will wear them again only when it is time to return home” (107). Her self-confidence and self awareness is symbolized by her identifying herself with the Ganga—“No longer a moody mountain stream, she is mature, powerful, sure of herself (108).

This awareness of her maturity coupled with the liberatory environment—“I have not known so much silence… Nor have I ever had so much of the world to myself” (108)—enable her to connect with the self and the unexplored world. This new perception of the self and out of the world experience—“everything looks different” (107) become all the more intense for Shakuntala when she encounters Nearchus, a Greek traveller there. With his laughter, carefree looks and the reins of horse in his hand, he becomes a symbol of the non-domestic domain for which she has been yearning since long. So rising above the fixed gender concepts, she becomes an intense gazer (not the gazed one like the mythical Shakuntala) and feeds her eyes on the physical details of the man:

He is short, with muscular thighs and stocky calves and the curliest hair I have ever seen and he is dressed differently from all the men I know…. He looks utterly carefree, reckless and happy; his square firm face holds a baffling merriment, and I know, instinctively, that he has travelled many worlds to be here. (109)

His enchanting smile turns this female gazer into a chaser of male (as opposed to Kalidas’s Dushyant as a gazer and chaser). So, taking the subject position, Shakuntala with full knowledge—“the intimacy of the moment is illicit” (109)—yields to the call of her heart and body and indulges in love-making with Nearchus. This act of love-making shatters not only the dominant perception of sexuality as a male privilege but that of women as desexualized creatures or what Germaine Greer calls female eunuchs. Shakuntala not only asserts and fulfills her sexual desire but participates in the act as
equal partner. This is symbolized by use of the pronoun ‘we’ in the description of her sexual union with Nearchus:

We lay ourselves on the river shore… we do not go through the set motions of desire and arousal, there are no love bites or coy looks or shy smiles, we scramble into each other as rabbits into their burrows. We are instinct itself… Every limb in my body is alive, and yet I am rested and satiated. (10)

However, the way to assertion and liberation is never easy. It has its share of pain, trauma and suffering. Shakuntala too, has to pay a price for it. She is torn by two opposing voices— one calling her to return home away from violation of matrimonial promise and the other urging her to run away from the hollowness of their matrimonial vows. But as Shakuntala is still in the process of reinventing herself, the patriarchal pull proves stronger. She re-wears her silver anklets and returns home. This home-coming of Shakuntala proves to be her acid test. The everlooming presence of Kamalini around Srijan, and Srijan’s oppressive silence and distance from her make her discern that Srijan now seeks Kamalini and not her. Her reflection, “I was not angry with Srijan—he was a man, it was the way of the world as I knew it” (58) becomes a sad and mocking commentary on the double standards of patriarchy. So Shakuntala tries hard to woo Srijan by decking at her best and also by playing Kamalini in the bed-chamber. However, she finds no joy, no fulfillment because of his indifference to her desire. Hence, deprived of sexual satisfaction and comfortable familiarity of the house— “What was here to hold me back? Not Srijan’s love, as lying as a Mina’s Chatter” (114)— she makes her choice. She displays that “agency” now lies with her and not with her husband, her family or society. Nurturing no apprehension in spite of her pregnant state, she leaves the home without even casting a last look at Srijan. When she reaches the shore, she flings her silver anklets into the water (does not leave them at the shore, as she has done earlier). Thus, she leaves Shakuntala and all her memories behind to make new explorations far from the patriarchal constructs.

This narrative strategy of dislocating Shakuntala from home serves in various ways to make the novel a narrative of body. It enables Gokhale to explore women’s uninhibited sexuality and wander lust. Moreover, by freeing Shakuntala from the
constraints of wifehood and motherhood, it gives a feminist twist to Shakuntala’s subjectivity. It is because in the dominant discourse, motherhood is used as “one of the cultural impositions which deny women personhood. And though life is born out of the sexual act, motherhood itself erases both sexuality and selfhood” (Jain, Across Cultures 122). Since, Shakuntala is cast in the feminist mould, she does not let her biological role obstruct her journey to selfhood. This subversion is all the more subversive because the man Shakuntala elopes with is a low caste mlechha, an unclean Yavan from a distant land. In fact, this moment of her elopement with Nearchus has been used by Gokhale as, what Kristyn Gorton calls, a “life altering situation” which draws the subject away from her existing position and transforms her (Theorising Desire 2). This transformation is aptly marked by Shakuntala assuming a new name, Yaduri, to initiate herself to a new world of unbridled joys of body and of exploration of new lands and people.

This assumption of new subjectivity not only defies the dominant perception of women’s singular identity, but also makes Shakuntala look at herself and the world around through a woman’s perspective. She finds young, carefree, happy and reckless looking Nearchus to be a foil to Srijan. Therefore, she seems wholly at ease even in the strange and unfamiliar world to which Nearchus belongs. Moreover, her intense quest for the unknown and the unseen makes her ignore the unclean ways of the Yavanas and their segregation from the mainstream life. Enjoying utter and absolute freedom in his company, she lives only in the present “unhinged from everything before and after” (117). Her love for the Yavan might be called “the celebration of leela (play)” because it is “spontaneous, mischievous, sexual, temporary and joyful—the achievement of a oneness of body and soul in an ecstatic union that is ephemeral by its nature” (Lal, “Sita” 60).

Through Shakuntala’s love for Nearchus, Gokhale dismantles another dominant perception of reducing women’s sexuality to be only a means of procreation. Shakuntala’s sexual love for Srijan might have been for procreation, but her love for Nearchus is linked with pleasure of body only. That is why she sometimes craves to taste the sweat on his skin and at other times finds unleashed pleasure in his rough and hungry way of love-making. Moreover, in the company of Nearchus, she also satisfies her long cherished wander lust (by travelling through forests, fields, waters and plains)
and quest for knowledge (by getting willing answers to her queries about lands and people, merchants and their trade items). It is these traits of Shakuntala which make her transgress the stereotyped image of docile and passive women and bridge the gap between the domestic and the non domestic domain.

This unconventional behaviour of Shukantala makes her appear peculiar even to Nearchus (earlier Srijan has wondered) who says, “You find more pleasure in my tongue than in my kisses!... You are probably not a female at all,...You are not vain, you do not complain while travelling and you take interest in the most unusual things”! (136). This kind of disposition of Shakuntala and the response of men in her life to her distinct behavior contribute to the feminist perspective of the novel by blurring gender difference. Moreover, Shakuntala’s bonding with Nearchus based on his understanding of her physical and intellectual needs— “he recognized some part of my mind and spirit that others did not” (172)—calls attention to the need for basing man-woman relationship on mutuality and emotional bonding. In fact, this aspect of relationship draws attention even in Gokhale’s other novels like Paro and Priya.

Interrogation of women’s fixed and singular identity forms an important aspect of the writings which use body as a site. So, Shakuntala is seen exercising her agency by making new choices and revising earlier decisions in accordance with her newly emerging situations. Her awareness of the creeping bitterness in her relationship with Nearchus and his addressing her as “my delicious Yaduri!” (163) in full view of his merchant friends make her realize that he is now treating her as an object of consumption. Moreover, she also senses that she is becoming a burden on his freedom, and being a free bird herself, she does not want to hamper others’. She realizes that the time has come to make her choice once again— “I knew that I loved him, but I also knew that our time together was over” (171). So owning the responsibility of her choice to be with Nearchus, she is ready to take his changed attitude as a kind of punishment— “if I was suffering my mistake I would do so scorning the pain that accompanied it” (173).

This assessment and reassessment of situation prepares Shakuntala to make another big choice in her march towards self-realization. As a mature being, she now
realizes that loving, trusting and losing someone is a part of life. She also accepts the limitations of a human—“The world is a very big place, bigger than anyone can imagine” (172). Moreover, she finds that her own appetite for experiences of the physical world is no longer strong, “I had seen, heard, smelt, felt, too much” (187). So, she now begins to yearn for some higher experiences—“somewhere the cords that connect me to my body have snapped” (161). This changed perception of Shakuntala once again interrogates the dominant perception of women’s singular and stable identity. So to make Shakuntala explore higher things and undertake journey within, the narrative takes her to the sacred city of Kashi, situated on the bank opposite to the quarters of Yavanas. If her earlier relocation turned her into a seeker of pleasure, this relocation turns her into a seeker of spiritual truths. That is why Geeta Doctor, in her review of the novel, calls her “the female counterpart of Hesse’s Siddhartha, a seeker who must follow the trail of her destiny without looking back, solely because it is not the answers that matter but the questions” (“The Mystic Lover”).

With Shakuntala’s arrival in Kashi, the city of Moksha, the novel seems to be focusing on what has come to be called feminist spirituality or liberated spirituality. This emerging movement considers transformation in religious belief an important aspect of feminist transformation. It is not only because religion has come to be an integral part of human life, but also because religion and religious practices have been used to subjugate women. Moreover, most of religions look upon women as inherently evil, who draw men away from transcendence. Seeking inspiration from the goddess centred spiritual traditions of eastern religions like Hinduism, the feminist spirituality intends to serve feminism by representing new positive self-images of women empowerment. Moreover, it attempts to free metaphysical quest from gender constructs. By bringing Shakuntala to Kashi, the narrative not only seems to use Kashi as a metaphor of liberation but also as a site for Shakuntala’s journey within.

In portraying this spirituality through Shakuntala, the novel challenges again the monolithic and unitary patriarchal image of women as well as religious manipulations to keep them away from higher pursuits. In this way the novel tries to portray women’s subjectivity beyond gender constraints. Seeds of this aspect of subjectivity have been sown in Shakuntala’s mind in her childhood by the Bhikushini’s call of “Awake, arise
and commence” and her own curiosity to know and learn things by eavesdropping the lessons taught to her brother by his tutor. However, at that phase of her life, she could not understand the significance of those words. She could only wonder “How did one commence a new life unless one died and was reborn?” (15). By now she has come to realize that awaking, arising and commencing a new life imply reinventing identity according to the need of the situation.

This time she is seen reinventing her spiritual identity which has been lying latent within her. It finds reflection in the narrative on many occasions. Every time she is distressed, she seeks refuge in the inner chamber of the temple of Matrika, representing the ‘Shakta’ tradition which believes in physical and emotional strengths of women. Namita Gokhale calls this shakta tradition “the veneration of the feminine principle” and a source of inspiration for the hill women of Kumaon (Mountain Echoes 12). Shakuntala’s interest in the spiritual and metaphysical finds reflection in her occasional dialogues with her fisherman friend Kundan, who explains death as “the loss of our natural environment”(84). Further, her learned conservations with his brother Guresvera about the views of great sages also portray Shakuntala’s efforts to acquaint herself with the metaphysical matters. However, this metaphysical quest, remains dormant because of her preoccupation with her quest for the physical and geographical in Nearchus’s company.

So, the foregrounding of Shakuntala’s spiritual quest requires a shift away from her focus on the bodily and geographical quest. Hence, once again, she reinvents herself to arise and Commence a new life. Displaying her control on the self and shedding the identity of Yaduri, she leaves Neacrhus without bidding goodbye. She rises again like the Sphinx—“I felt revived, redeemed. Everything seemed possible again’(174)—and reassumes the name Shakuntala. She does not let even the physical discomfort caused by her advanced pregnant stage interfere with her spiritual exploration. The environment of Kashi (with its burning pyres, sounds of the gongs and its association with Kali, Shiva, and deliverance) brings to surface Shakuntala’s latent metaphysical quest. Contemplating on the questions of detachment and attachment, she realizes “Real detachment comes only with the involvement” (170). So recalling her embodied experiences with the men in her life, she thinks simultaneously of Srijan and
Nearchus— “Both these men seemed like shadows, I could not believe that they had existed, that my life had once been a part of theirs. Now I was alone, no one’s wife or mistress, nor sister” (181). Thus, free from her role of a wife or mistress and relational dependence on men, she channelizes her desires and energy towards her spiritual quest. Her freedom from patriarchal structures and male gaze brings her closer to her selfhood. She is seen rising above the gender constructs. That is why on seeing a naked holy man (trying to shame and embarrass her with his looks), she looks back into his eyes without a sense of shame or fear. She even considers challenging him by stripping off her clothes and walking with her taut breasts and swollen pregnant belly, and reminds of the subversive image of Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi.

The feminist within Shakuntala makes her find a feminist twist in the mythical tales told by the preachers during their sermons on the ghats of Kashi. She thinks about the power of women mentioned in Mandana Misra’s tale (which sees his wife acting as a moderator in a debate on the Vedas) and also the myth of Narada turning into a woman (Saubhagyasundari) to seek higher truths. Listening to the myth of Vishnu’s ten avtaars, her feminist mind sees the significance of ‘womb’ for human life “why you might ask yourself, would Vishnu the lord of creation enter this ceaseless ocean of birth and rebirth?... Why does he abandon the pleasures of Vaikuntha, forsake his heaven to dwell in a womb, hanging head downwards, trapped in woman’s waste and urine, eating and drinking the same, tormented by worms, and scorched by the digestive fire? (183). This interrogation of the myth of Vishnu in the novel becomes an attempt to write the body discourse by bringing female body (instead of phallus) to focus. Moreover, by dwelling on the details of the phase of pregnancy and linking it with god Vishnu’s ten births, the novel stresses on the need of freeing motherhood from the deity like status and looking upon it as a biological process.

However, the path of resistance and assertion is never easy and Shakuntala’s narrative journey repeatedly illustrates this. Even in the last phase of her life, she has to pay a heavy price by experiencing inner conflict in the form of nightmares (a charging bull tearing her womb), apparitions of Yama-Yami, visions of her life experiences and images of Shiva and Kali. In fact the recurring images of Shiva and Kali or Shakti in the narrative help to strengthen the feminist perspective of the text in many ways. The
image of Shiv-Shakti, is significant because it symbolizes not only “the reconciliation of male-female polarities” but also the mingling of the erotic and the ascetic, of death-in-life and life-in-death with the destruction of desires (Gokhale, The Book of Shiva 67-71). Moreover, the image of Kali with its naked body and fierce look represents the opposite of the culturally produced covered, modest and docile female bodies and stresses upon the need for women’s self-assertion. All these images and sights together help to present an alternative understanding of gender and sexuality. They also enable Shakuntala to get answers to her other long pending spiritual queries. She comes to realize that “for the born, death is certain, and for the dead, rebirth” (183) and “All pleasure, all pain is illusion. What you gain and what you lose, what is beautiful and what is ugly— It is all the same, all is illusion” (184). These fragments of knowledge help Shakuntala to nurture no regret over her past decisions and actions— “It was not him [Srijan] that I had run away from. I had set out in search of a part of myself, and it had eluded me. I had not traded one life for another” (194).

It is this understanding of life which becomes for her a means to her calm acceptance of death— “it was time for me to die” (193) towards the end of the narrative. However, her rebellious and stubborn spirit finds its assertion even during her dying moments. She refuses to embrace Buddhism despite persistent entreaties of the Buddhist nun, who attends on her during her battle with death, “I would not embrace the Buddha only to please her” (197). Even as a soul she refuses to seek release before she relives her memories by flying over the places where she had lived and experienced as a ‘body’. What strengthens Shakuntala’s portrayal and narrative as a feminist one is not only her exercise of agency (in her exploration of sexuality, geographical territories and the metaphysical) but also her readiness to take the onus and bear the consequences of every choice made by her. In reply to a holy man’s question as to who has dishonoured her, she says, “I myself have dishonoured myself… This honour rests only with me” (168) and so she refuses to get from him a talisman to ward off evil. And again with her answer to Mahout’s question “what misfortune brings you here?” in the form of counter-question “Is it only sorrow that makes one move on… Can it not be curiosity or the joy of travel?” (175)— she defies the dominant patriarchal image of women as irrational beings fit to be confined to the domestic domain.
Shakuntala’s death in the end of the novel and her own disparaging comments about herself in the narrative have led many critics to dub her narrative as a morality tale by seeing her death as a defeat of the immoral or a fallen woman. For example, after watching the enactment of Abhijnana Shakuntala in the company of Nearchus, she reflects:

Even in the moment of her disgrace, Kalidasa’s Shakuntala had the sanctity of a secret marriage. But I had betrayed everything… I had abandoned the husband whose true wife I was. No matter that he had other wives before me. The noble king Dushyanta had wives aplenty, and yet there was no slur in his love-making with Shakuntala…. Only I stood condemned. (150)

Again, after Srijan brings Kamalini home, she says, “I was not angry with Srijan—he was a man, men mere allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it” (58). Then there are references to her self-guilt at her failure to keep her man hooked to her— “I was a woman, it was my lot to please my husband, to live at his pleasure” (68).

However, when read between the lines and with the perspective of the text in mind, such details appear mocking interrogation of the dominant gender difference and image of wifehood. Such details not only build tension in the narrative but lead the readers to a carefully manipulated feminist effect in the end of the novel. These details unexpectedly disclose to us “our misreading” and force us to make “a corrective re-reading in late re-cognition” (Herman 117). So, what the novel appears to portray is not the fall of Shakuntala, but the fall or destruction of the patriarchal image of purity, sexuality and docility imposed on female bodies. This view might be textually supported by what Shakuntala’s spirit says in chapter OO, which describes her last visions in the third person and the voice of the soul (of a woman) in the first person:

A gust of anger rose inside me, compounded of contempt and clarity, and of exhilaration. It did not matter, I realized that I had lived my life one way rather than another. The world would always have its way; at least I had searched for mine… I had not wasted my life. I had lived. Like a minor wind, I saw myself afloat and rising. (207-208)
Thus the ending part of the narrative registers not only a woman’s anguish at the organized and institutionalized control of women’s bodies, but also affirms the assertion and agency exercised by a woman cast in the feminist mould.

To conclude, the chapter, by analyzing multifaceted aspects of Shakuntala’s portrayal and her complex narrative journey, has tried to read the novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* as a feminist statement. Shakuntala is seen using her body and its experiences as means not only to resist and transgress fixed gender roles and codes of conduct, but also to grow as a person by daring to fulfill her different desires and dreams. With her curiosity, keen sense of observation, self-learning, self-assertion and the potential to reinvent herself again and again, she displays what Nina Baym calls “new and quite rare emergence of female power” (19). Shakuntala’s conviction in her own worth (not only as a body and mind, but as a soul as well) makes the text support feminism by mitigating the gender difference and presenting alternative images of women. Her journey for the self, as she herself observes, has attempted to portray “the self is a seedling, a core, which observes, experiences and persists even when everything else changes and passes” (48). Thus by making her emerge finally as a detached spectator who has enjoyed and lived life as she had wanted to, the novel calls for the need to address women’s physical, intellectual and spiritual needs to make them equal participants in the drama of life. The novel also proves that endless possibilities exist for women if they dare to desire and discover.

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