

A Study of Mythological representation in the novel of Namit Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory

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Abstract

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory, one of best novel of Gokhale .The Novel was published in 2005. This novel starts, On the ghats of Kashi, the most ancient of cities, a woman confronts memories that have pursued her through birth and rebirth. In the life she recalls, she Shakuntala of the northern mountains-spirited, imaginative, but destined like her legendary namesake to suffer 'the samskaras of abandonment'. Stifled by social custom, hungry for experience, she deserts home and family for the company of a Greek horse merchant she meets by the Ganga. Shakuntala: The play of Memory, is an intriguing in interplay of myth and history. The plot is not only borrowed but also influenced with the famous ancient Sanskrit play Abhijanjna Shakuntalam written by a well known poet and dramatist Kalidasa in the fourth century. Gokhale used Indian myth to develop her thought about feminism. She seems to be fond of representing Kalidasa's Shakuntala, who lost her ring the only evidence of her Gandharva marriage with Dushyant in the modern perspective.

KEYWORD: Pursued, Rebirth, Samskaras, Abandonment, Merchant, Interplay, Myth,

Perspective. Namita Gokhale has emerged as a leading woman novelist on the Indian Literary scene. Namita Gokhale, the author of twelve books in English, writes a regular 'agony aunt' column for newspapers. She was born in Lucknow in 1956 and her father was a police officer. She is also Co-director of Jaipur Literature Festival, along with the author William Dalrymple. She is a versatile writer with wide ranging, novels, a collection of short stories, and several works of non-fiction.

Indian Writings are enriched with stories and themes drawn from Vedas, Upanishada, Purana, Geeta, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Buddhist Scriptures. The concept of Hindu culture is founded by many myths and folklores such as Vedic Shloka, epics, purana and regional tales. In Hinduism there are several sets of ideas to define its rules and regulations, belief system, traditions, customs and sacraments etc. Particular feature of Hinduism is its Sacraments called Samskaras. There is a significant relationship between these Samskaras and culture. Since birth till death a human being, particularly in India, is confined to various types of Samskaras which grant them decorum and dignity.

The Dictionary of common Sanskrit Spiritual Words defines Sanskara(Samskara) as:

Whenever an action is performed with the desire for a specific (whether for one self or another) Samskara is created for that person. These accumulate and determine the

situation with which we will be presented in future and will influence the scope of future actions.

In Hinduism, there are mainly **Sixteen Samskaras** ranging from conception of a child to the funeral ceremonies. These Samskaras are transmitted from generation to generation. Moreover it is believed that Samskaras of previous lives remain stick to the soul in upcoming lives. Dr.SatyaprasadDasji states that "... human soul is eternal and these samskaras are inseparably attached with the soul. Wherever this human soul would go, these Samskaras would remain attached with him" (10)

Namita Gokhale's novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* has its roots deeply down in these beliefs of Hinduism. However her treatment and analysis of these samskaras and ideologies is altogether critical and thought provoking. Her interest and belief in mythical studies is well known in the literary world. She has recently edited, in collaboration with MalashriLal, an anthology **In Search of Sita: Revisting Mythology**. She has been taking pains in re-interpreting the myths and their impacts on the lives of Indian Women.

In her masterpiece *Shakuntala: The play of Memory*, is an intriguing in interplay of myth and history. The plot is not only borrowed but also influenced with the famous ancient Sanskrit play *AbhijanjnaShakuntalam* written by a well known poet and dramatist Kalidasa in the fourth century. Gokhale used Indian myth to develop her thought about feminism. She seems to be fond of representing Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, who lost her ring the only evidence of her Gandharva marriage with Dushyant in the modern perspective. The background, narrative technique and settings are also takes us into the world of beliefs and religion. Neeta.Gupta remarks this novel:

She has successfully inter-woven religion, social history and timeless tale to produce a novel that stands out for its rich narrative text nonstop it is undoubtedly one of her best works so far (56-57)

NamitaGokhale also uses myth of Indra's curse and dreadful punishment like Girishkarnad in *Fire and the Rain*. The villagers had admitted that every human should have paid worship to their gods for their survival and better future otherwise their god would be unhappy and consequently punish them with their supernatural strength. In summer season the fire in the forest spreads in a destructive manner. *Shakuntala's* mother fearfully says about the wrath of Agnidev:

It was a strange year. In the summer there were forest fires, flares of spiteful flame enveloping the green forests where I was accustomed to roam. 'The god Agni is showing his wrath,' mother said fearfully. The villagers have forgotten to propitiate him, they have abandoned the fire-sacrifice, the old ways (SPM 20)

Another myth about the personification of animals, they act like human. As we find in some ancient tales such as their relationship with human being and their living ways like as man and woman. In the novel Gokhale uses myth about bear an animal that catches girls and marriages with them: Mother forbade me to leave the house by night or day, for bears were known to carry away young girls and take them as their wives. (SPM 22)

NamitaGokhale has portrayed the life of a woman who confronts memories of her previous life. In these memories she finds her Shakuntala, a Spirited, imaginative and freedom loving woman. However, in that life she is destined, like her legendary namesake Shakuntala of Kalidasa'sAbhijnanaShakuntalam, to suffer the samskara of abandonment.

Shakuntala of NamitaGokhale's novel confronts with this Samskara right from her childhood. She says:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama...That Shankuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her father Vishwamitra and later by her husband Dushyanta- one could say that she carried within herself the samskara of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name (SPM 6-7).

During the absence of Gureshwar, Shakuntala's mother does not scold her even tells a story to console her anguish behavior. The myth of Rakshasa is used by the novelist to adjoin her story in narrative technique. The story of a raakshas named Uravasura, who lived in a cave and eats a virgin living in the nearest village in spring season every year:

Uncharacteristically, Mother didn't scold me for the ruination I had caused. Instead, she consoled me with a story her grandmother had told her in those long-ago times in the northern mountains. It was about a demon, a rakshasa named Uruvasura, who lived in a deep cave in the rock face. Every year, as the zephyrs of Vasant announced the spring, this monstrous creature would devour a virgin from the nearby village. (SPM 28)

Shakuntala's mother locked her in gaushala and warned not to move anywhere from this place. She is disappointed and discriminated; however, she makes herself free and goes out from her house. She reaches in the dense forest and found herself alone and suffered one afraid of wild animals and demons. She manages her fear with her whistle. On the way she met a demons who often appears in folklores fairy tales. She keenly observes demoness' appearance and follows her orders to go along with her towards a cave such as she would have enchanted by the demoness as in the text of ancient Indian writings.

I whistled to myself now, a happy, cheerful tune that gave me courage and indicated to anyone who might hear that I was not afraid. Long into my trek, I saw a circle of fire floating towards me. Slinking even further to the side of the path, I huddled..... and I saw an unusually tall woman, naked but for a piece of coarse cloth around her waist, bend down and squat before me. She was slim and sinewy; her dark skin shone dully in the blue light of the moon. Removing the fire basket from her head, she placed it on the ground. (SPM 33)

Another use of myth about a gandharvaVisvvasu who is known for his temper to claim newly married woman of well born men. A traditional ritual is performed in the occasion of marriage. The other members of the family makes a rod of wood which is symbolized

as the Gandharva, it would not be crossed by a new couple during their first three nights. This rod may help the couple to have patience in the beginning of their conjugal life:

This is the rod of Visvavasu, the lusty Gandharva who claims the wives of wellborn men.....suffered Visvavasu in our lives. For three nights as the moon waxed we observed the vow of continence with which a true marriage must begin. (SPM 39)

In Hindu mythology an own son is only being who provides light their funeral pyres in the last ritual ceremony of their parents in the cremation ground. Shakuntala is the third wife of Srijan. His other wives had died and had not left any issue for his heir so Srijan is very eager to have his own child. He agrees to perform a ritual ceremony called Agnicayan to pray god and goddess with providing them Sura and dishes through the fire of hawan as well as slaughtering of goats:

During his travels to the east, Srijan had met a soothsayer who urged him to perform the Agnicayana ritual so that the new woman of his house might bear sons. Anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre, my husband decided to initiate the prayer..... priests from distant Kashi, inviting them to our mountain home to conduct the Agnicayana.(SPM 49)

Myth about slaughtering in Hindu mythology is used by NamitaGokhale in this novel. People who have earnest desires to get something related to their lives in this world, find themselves having effortless try to pray their god and goddess with no limitations even they attempt such deeds like murder of innocent living creatures. In the end of the ritual the head of the priests orders to a local priest as the lowest in the hierarchy to slaughter seven goats:

The village priest, the lowest in the hierarchy, was assigned the task of slaughtering the goats. He did this swiftly, without remorse. The sandy soil was stained with blood. The smell and sight of it sickened me. (SPM 53)

Myth about the sun as the lord of power is concerned with the expression of the beautiful surroundings at the time of half-dawn in the forest of mountain. Here Shakuntala befalls in the calamity which is brought by her husband. He comes along with a woman from the east region; Srijan bring another lady named Kamalnin the grab of a maiden for assisting her. Shakuntala understands in a moment about Srijan's purpose of her arrival and stay in her house. Shakuntala seems in depression and moves out again from her house. She goes to the old left temple where she often used to spend her time of loneliness while Srijan went in his travelling. She meets again a mysterious event with her and spends all night in a cave as Garvagrah under the temple. She wakes up in dawn and watches the Ashwin star while waiting Marut, the lord of wind and the sun, lord of power. She says that Usha is the daughter of the sun who appears with his chariot of seven horses from the heaven:

It was still the time of the half-dawn, when the Ushas, the daughters of heaven, first light the sky. I waited until the Ashvins and the Maruts and

the seven horses of the Sungod began the march of the day. Only when I could feel the golden rays of the Sun on my skin did I venture back home. (SPM 61)

One day while wandering in the shore, Shakuntala meets a young man whose looks are very carefree and joyous. She knows instinctively that he has travelled for long and through many countries to be there. He smiles at her and she is enchanted. She is highly attracted with his behavior and she starts thinking that her life has changed. She feels that she would not go back to where she had come from. His name is Nearchus. He is from the land of Yavanas. When he asks about of Shakuntala, she replies that she is "Yaduri." It is a turning point in the life of Shakuntala. Now her identity as Shakuntala is lost and she has become Yaduri, a trodden and fallen woman. She thinks that her thirst for traveling would be satisfied by Nearchus. Thus, as she seems hungry for experience and leaves home and family for the company of a Greek horse merchant. Shakuntala entices and surrenders herself to fulfill her desires of pleasure and knowledge. She starts living with the Yavana and she surrenders herself to the new life. In the company of the Yavana she realizes that the world is wild and wondrous place. She is happy to be free and alone and she enjoys life and flying like a bird. Sometimes she used to feel home sickness on the bank of the Ganga, she feels an intense sense of home coming. But now the way to go back has ceased. It is because of her knowledge that now the society would not accept her once again in the same role as she was in the past.

She is passionate, lively and enthusiastic to see the world "with the freedom of birds and clouds" (SPM 9). She finds no fault with disorder as she sees it as the natural condition of life. However, she is nurtured to be a disciplined woman. Her mother stresses her to conform to the demand of chastity, "Never forgot, the vessel of your virtue is like the urn of water you balance on your head,' she would say. You must not spill even a drop as you carry it home!" (SPM 40)

Right from her childhood she has suffered because of the typical samskara of abandonment. Her mother focuses all her attention on her son, Guresvara (Shakuntala's brother). She remains almost abandoned by her mother. When Shakuntala has her first menstrual blood flow, she is "abandoned" to "bleed to death" lest she defile the purity of the home (SPM 31). Later she is married to Srijan, a mahasamant whose earlier two wives are dead. He also tried to show her "the star of Arundhati . . . the emblem of fidelity" (SPM 42).

Shakuntala's married life also gets muddled when for years she finds herself unable to conceive. Although she is never tortured or tormented by her husband for this but she remains conscious that her husband is anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre. Situation becomes worst when her husband "brought back a woman with him" returning from his journey (SPM 57).

She feels a severe feeling of being abandoned by her husband. NamitaGokhale has delved deep in the psychology Shakuntala's character. In Shakuntala we meet a woman who has always seen herself aloof from her life. Her conditioning always demands from her confinement in the four walls of her household. But she has a strong urge to come out of the threshold. She confesses that "I was hungry for experience. There were things I

wanted to see, to know, to do. My ignorance irked me” (SPM 46). It is from here that Shakuntala, unlike her namesake, denies to remain confined in the stereotypical role. She decides to come out to explore the world of her desires. In Biblical myth, Eve was tempted to eat the fruit of knowledge and this to disobey God and as a consequence she became a fallen Angel. Shakuntala too steps out to taste the fruit of knowledge. Having the samskara of abandonment in her, this time it is she who abandons her married life. She rides off with a Greek traveller, Nearchus. However, it costs her the same fate as Eve. The death of Shakuntala leads to the birth of a fallen women, Yaduri beginning her new life in the holy kashi, the city mostly she wanted to visit. From the position of being a wife, she now assumes the identity of Yaduri—the fallen woman: “Yaduri . . . in swearing and profane language of men, the word also signified a yoni, a woman’s private part” (SPM 119).

Though Shakuntala surrenders to unbridled pleasures with Nearchus yet she is not satisfied. Her real desire is not that of sex but it is for knowledge and her quest for her inner self. Soon she becomes disillusioned with her relationship with Nearchus also when he starts objectifying her. She abandons him too, however to reach her tragic doom. Wandering in Kashi, the city of her dreams and desire, she is hit to death by a raged bull. However, in this doom she gets her redemption. In the last hours of her life she makes it clear that she had set out in search of a part of herself and that she “ had not traded one life for another” (SPM 194).

NamitaGokhale, in the end of the novel, very skillfully portrays Shakuntala’s soul abandoning her body which was subject to the worldly bondages and sacraments. She emerges as a unique genius to re-interpret the cursed samskara of abandonment as a kind of boon in favour of women to establish their individuality and true self. Her philosophy finds a clear expression in Shakuntala’s final assertion that:

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. That was the Taraka, Shiva’s mantra of deliverance. (SPM 207).

The narrative woven in a linear fashion is in a backward movement in Flashback, backward movement, when Shakuntala, with a child in her belly, ribbed apart is lying in a pool of flood, on the cobbled street of the holy Kashi. The last moments bring back all the past recollections, with awakening and anger; conflict and compromise; struggle and acceptance with a sence of remorse.

The novel can be read at two levels. On the surface level, the story line is of the narrative of an ill fated woman cursed for life’s turbulences, whose rebellious nature made her a woman of her own destiny, who had to submit finally to the will of the same fate. On the deeper level it is a tale of every woman who decides to walk on her, self created path but ends in a disaster. Shakuntala is every woman’s voice, who dares to raise, to question, social or religious issues as she falls to come to terms with the set, established codes of conduct. The spirit of questioning gives rises to a rejection and a sense of dislocation from all traditions and conventions owing to their meaningless and baseless motives and functions. The novel is the journeys towards awareness ending in yet another plane of conflict and confusion.

The novel begins with the burning ghats of Kashi and ends in the holy Kashi itself, thereby lending it a sense of haunting decay, doom and death.

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