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FROM DESIRE TO LIBERATION IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S
SHAKUNTALA: THE PLAY OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Indian Women writers have played a pivotal role in voicing the opinions and desires of Indian women. From re-reading the old Indian stories from a woman's perspective to affirming their identity in the contemporary times, they have explored the whole gamut of emotions. Namita Gokhale too traces the journey of women from all walks of life. In her current work, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, she has revisited the epic heroine but with a different approach. Known for her fearless style of writing, Gokhale has explored the female desire and how it liberates her characters in spite of their poignant end. Gokhale celebrates a woman's choices and their consequences in their search for identity. She questions the selective identities imposed on women and shows resistance to them through her characters.

Key Words- Identity, Women's writing, resistance, Desire, liberation, affirmation

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It would not be an overstatement that women writers today are driven by the urge to bring forth the experiences of women. Namita Gokhale belongs to the same class of writers who write enigmatic stories with female protagonists. She has a great interest in epic heroines especially her *Shakuntala: The play of Memory* is modelled on Kalidasa famous Shakuntala. It must have been Gokhale's desire to reread the ancient heroines through the prism of female identity that shaped the genesis of her book. And the results are quite fascinating for the modern readers who find a new perspective in Gokhale's rendering of the epic Shakuntala. Gokhale says in her book *In Search of Sita, Revisiting Mythology*,

Mythology in India is not just an academic or historical subject; it is vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of 'modern' India cannot be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective faith of the people. (XIV)

The myths have a controlling effect on us even today. Shashi Deshpande in her article "Telling our own stories" says:

Our epics and puranas are still with us and among us...over the years they have been reinvented, reshaped and regionalized. Myths continue to be our reference point for people in their daily lives

and we have so internalized them that they are part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity. (Deshapande 86)

Myths form the cultural traditions that have been significant in constructing identity. An investigation into history is relevant to invalidate the single identity that Indian woman has been projected with. As Romila Thapar says in her lecture "Selecting Identities from the Past",

What is sometimes constructed as community, tradition and identity, with the claim of historical legitimacy, is often invalidated by history. So when we look at the past for an identity, and we do this regularly in many walks of life, the search has to be realistic. I would like to argue that it is not feasible for us to maintain that there was in the early historical past a single identity for the Indian woman, as is frequently maintained, and that this became what we call the traditional identity.

There has been a traditional image of Indian woman in history. The first example that comes to mind is of Sita from *Ramayana* who has been endorsed for obvious reasons as an ideal Indian woman, devoted to a husband, who protects her from the clutches of Ravana. But Thapar informs us of another Sita of an oral tradition who battles Ravana herself without any Ram. It is apparent that while documenting the events of history, some writers preferably men have been selective in choosing the first Sita and she became synonymous with the image of Indian women. The same happened with some other great epic women characters too. A brief analysis of Shakuntala from *Mahabharata* and her later versions support the claim of selective identities in case of women. Shakuntala of the epic *Mahabharata* was a bold woman whereas Kalidasa Shakuntala from *Abhijnanasakuntalam* was a gentle and a more submissive one who attributed her suffering to her destiny. Shakuntala has played many roles. Some other versions too appeared in eighteenth century. What is striking is that Kalidasa Shakuntala became an epitome of an Indian woman, a submissive, chaste, abandoned woman who must prove her worth to be accepted as a respectable woman in society and continues to be so till date. Even with the rereading of the Sakuntala by Tagore, it is the woman, who remains impeachable; the responsibility of Dusyanta as it was in the great epic is not touched upon. Even the sexuality in the play between Sakuntala and Dusyanta is underplayed as it was considered socially inferior. To Quote from *Sakuntala-Texts, Readings, Histories*.

The concern with the erotic introduced the question of morality. This was not the morality of Dusyanta's rejection of Sakuntala, however, but that of Sakuntala responding to sexual desire and agreeing to a *gandharava* marriage. (Thapar 241)

Gokhale has explored the same sexual desire in her novel *Shakuntala-The Play of Memory* which narrates the story of the protagonist in some twenty two odd episodes in the form of memories and reveries of Shakuntala. The novel is a woman's voyage towards self-discovery through her innumerable experiences of life. The theme of the novel is, after exorcising guilt and fear of the past how Shakuntala tries to escape from the bondage of her situations; her quest for her 'self' coming to terms with her past, and her attainment of self. At the very onset of novel, the heroine is looking for release, suggesting the bondages she's been living with:

She will not leave me, that Shakuntala; I carry her pain, and the burden of loves I still do not understand. (2)

Shakuntala was named by her mother after the great Kalidasa famous heroine from *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. We see Shakuntala as a five year old girl who detested her mother's repressive, authoritarian figure. By the end of the novel she matures into a strong and experienced woman. Since the novel is in the form of memory, Shakuntala narrated her adventures, experiences as she remembers them. About her childhood we come to know about her widowed mother who was illiterate and a brother, Govinda in a remote village in the northern mountains. Right from her childhood Shakuntala is a carefree and a very spirited girl, eager and restless to see the world. Once as a child she wandered into the forest and when she came back late, her mother rebuked her,

You wicked heartless girl! She shrieks. 'Were you born only to trouble and torment me?'(6).

Her relationship with her mother is tumultuous right from the beginning. Her mother's loyalty to the patriarchal norms and her strict adherence to them create a fissure between the mother –daughter relationship. Shakuntala was full of repulsion towards her mother:

I hated everything about my mother, from her tangled hair to her shuffling gait and her cracked, dirty feet. I did not ever want to become like her. (8)

Shakuntala hated the norms and the barriers exclusively made for women and since her mother was a physical manifestation of those rigid social structures, she hated her too. Shakuntala was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds but her mother told her, Remember Shakuntala, she said, 'birds return to their nests at dusk, but clouds must weep their tears unseen in distant lands. (9)

Looking at metamorphically the cloud represents the desires of young woman who wishes to wander but must weep for trespassing in an unknown world. The 'nest' becomes a symbol of home and confinement for women. Shakuntala's life is dictated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society that are ingrained into the feminine psyche. According to her mother, her life is meant only to be a wife and mother. Shakuntala is denied basic happiness and space, which she yearns for but fails to achieve. She is forced to lead a life of limitations whereas her brother enjoys his life to the fullest. The indifference of her mother towards her is visible throughout her early formative years. Always curious of learning, Shakuntala would evade household work to eavesdrop on her brother's lessons. It was her brother's tutor who told her the story of the epic Shakuntala in broken fits and start as she was frequently called by her mother for household chores. Her mother's only responsibility towards her daughter was marriage. As Shakuntala felt suffocated by her mothers' torment, she thought marriage would relieve her of her monotonous life.

I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation. (18)

Marriage has always given some sort of optical illusion of a safe haven to young girls, who imagined it to be a gateway from all the bondages of their paternal home. As Simone de Beauvoir says:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a protectors for her [woman] the most important of undertakings...she will free herself from the paternal home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not by active congruent but by delivering herself, up passive and docile, into the hands of a new master... (Beauvoir, 352)

Shakuntala's mother tried to teach her some lessons of life and chastity before marriage. 'Chastity' has a special role in our society along with rituals of fertility. Speaking on the same Thapar says in "Selecting Identities from the Past",

Sexuality associated with fertility rituals occurs in the Vedic *ashvamedha*, and could well go back earlier. Nevertheless, control over what was said to be a woman's chastity was thought to be essential to subordinating women, as were also marriage regulations. Chastity was a euphemism for sexuality. It was said to be the touchstone of a woman's power. Making it into a fetish led to variant movement of a different kind.

Apparently such sermons of chastity confused the young Shakuntala. But she would not listen submissively and put uneasy questions to her mother who was insistent on teaching morals to her daughter. When her mother compares Govinda as a "reflection of some divinity" (19), Shakuntala dissolves into jealous rage, plucks all the marigolds in the garden and stomps on them till they interred in the damp earth. Her rage signifies her resistance to such practices and forewarns of the coming events in her life.

Shakuntala's mother settles her marriage with Srijan, a chief of fourteen villages and a widower. Shakuntala is his third wife; his earlier wives had died without giving any heir to him. In her early days of marriage provides Shakuntala a rare degree of freedom, she says,

I could swim in the river when I pleased; climb the trees in the forest in search of bird nests, rest in grassy meadows to stare at the sky and dream. (41).

Srijan was a well-travelled man with a cosmopolitan approach but on her wedding night as part of ritual Srijan says,

Beyond that tree, above the mountain, you can see the star of Arundhati. She is the purest of wives, the emblem of fidelity. As you see that star by my guidance, so I shall guide in one life together towards the vision of right and wrong. (42)

This wasn't acceptable to the ever searching soul of Shakuntala's and her thirst for freedom didn't cease even after her marriage. Like her husband she too wanted to visit new places. Being an equal in bed she wanted equality in all her choices. Her husband, who had initially shown no interest in rituals, was desperate for an heir and called priests to perform a yagna for a child. This was a painful revelation to Shakuntala who had her own expectations from marriage and believed her husband would not be a stereotyped husband. It made her realize that she was incomplete as a wife if she could not provide her husband with a child. Shakuntala could not conceive after a short period of marriage. Since the fault always lies with the woman it causes distress in Shakuntala,

Every month my ritu would arrive and prove me barren; Srijan's seed would not prosper within me. I was at fault. (49)

She realizes her unimportance when her husband brings home a handmaiden, Kamalini while returning from one of his trips. But she hardly looked or behaved like a maid. This infuriates Shakuntala and she asks Srijan about this unwanted guest he says,

Do not ask any questions, Shakuntala, (58).

Shakuntala resigns to her fate, since her husband was a man and men were allowed everything. The notion of right or wrong applied to women only. History is full of kings and men of high caste who exploited the services of Dalit Devadasis, even the caste observances were thrown to the winds. Such an institution of Devadasis was closely associated with the ritual of fertility. As far as Shakuntala is concerned, she wasn't prepared for a third person in her married life. Of all her struggles so far this seems to be the hardest of all. Sexuality outside marriage for women has been conveniently sidelined and historical validation is often cited by men to get away from all their philandering. Shakuntala's position is threatened by Kamalini and she doesn't accept the authority of the house as a compensation for allowing another woman in the same place. She is full of loathe for such laws that subordinate the desires of a woman. The female desire has a very vital role in our social fabric but as Kuhu Chanana Says,

Though the female desire is crucial to our social fabric, yet it is recast and reformulated by men, and the depiction of truly...liberated woman is still tantalizing dream. (Chanana).

Alienation sets in Shakuntala's life, she feels insecure and spends time at an isolated Matrik Temple in the forest where she meets a fisherman who becomes her friend and answers her questions on life. She starts spending time in forest, pondering over her life while at the same time jealousy pierced her heart for the other woman who had entered her life. She says,

I screamed and sobbed aloud; beating my head against the stone walls of temple like the kind of woman I had imagined I would ever become (58)

After prolonged battle Shakuntala finally conceives but her discontentment with her present life empowers all her motherly emotion. Not caring for her impending motherhood she embarks on a journey with Nearchus, a man whom she met during one of her visits to an isolated temple. He appears to her as an opportunity to see the world she so desired. But her mind is torn between her two worlds

Two voices rise within. One guiding me to return home, away from this violation, this absolute mockery of the matrimonial promises of love. The other buzzing about my ears like a bhrumari, a lascivious bee, urges me to flee, run away as far and as fast as I can, before Kamalini and the palanquin-bearers, intruders from another life, come in search of me. (111)

Carrying in her womb her husband's child, Shakuntala leaves her husband to explore the unknown lands and unlock the mysteries of life of distant lands and experience an entirely different kind of love. Before running away with Nearchus she throws away silver anklets, a symbol of bondage and suppression. Nearchus, a young and well-built man fascinates Shakuntala with his umpteen numbers of stories of his world wide adventures in cities unknown to her. She says,

He looks utterly carefree, reckless and happy; his square, firm face holds a baffling merriment, and I know, instinctively, that he has travelled for long and through many worlds to be here. He smiles. I am enchanted by his smile (109).

Shakuntala takes up a new name 'Yaduri as part of her new life. It seemed to baptize her. Her new life with Nearchus enchants her and she enjoys the new sexual energy with him. With Nearchus, Shakuntala feels that she is finally able to live and travel to her heart's content. It is liberation from her married life. But does she find herself or is it just an escape like her marriage was from her mother's home. With time she realizes that Nearchus too, is a part of the same old systems of belief and masculine order of the world. When being asked by Shakuntala as to how many cities he had visited. He laughingly said,

Cities, my lady, are like beautiful women. After a while they all begin to appear the same. (130)

He is surprised that Shakuntala has penchant for every bit of knowledge. He is not used to women like Shakuntala who raise questions. Women for him are only meant to be slave to men,

You are probably not a female at all, he teased. You are not vain, you do not complain while travelling, and you take interest in the most unusual things. (136)

An attitude like this reaffirms the set of behavior expected from women. Vanity and nagging are considered synonymous with women. A deviation from the norm means a sacrilege. Shakuntala is unusual and is led by instinct. Though life with Nearchus is adventures and he takes good care of her but memories along with guilt keep Shakuntala uneasy. After living with Nearchus for a short period, he says, "You are my wife now, my delicious yaduri!" (163) Shakuntala thinks, "I cannot be his wife; I am the wife of another" (163). Shakuntala feels guilty of leaving her husband and eloping with another man. She remembers Kalidasa's Shakuntala after watching an enactment of the play during her stay with Nearchus,

Even in the moment of her disgrace, Shakuntala had the sanctity of a secret marriage. But I had betrayed everything. I had renounced my name, I was no longer Shakuntala, only Yaduri, the unmentionable one. (150)

Returning to her husband is a daunting task. Though her husband, Srijan was himself guilty of adultery but Shakuntala was aware that he wouldn't forgive his wife for the same. Both Srijan and Nearchus disappointed her as they represent the same anarchic system of gender that she despised all her life. Her life seems meaningless. Oscillating between her past and present she wonders,

As days progress, I can feel my belly swelling up. My nipples hurt. I am often tired. Nearchus has noticed how full my belly looks, examined its roundness. I will tell him that the baby is his, it is his daughter I am carrying and she will have his golden hair, his blue eyes. He will believe me. He will never know. But I know, and regret stabs at my heart when I think of Srijan. I miss his arms at night, his broad shoulders. I put a pillow around Nearchus's back and pretend he is Srijan. He indulges me. He does not know what I am thinking, what I am going through. (169)

At last Shakuntala leaves Nearchus and starts her final journey to find her true self. In the middle of night, she takes a boat to Kashi, a city that always fascinated her. She visits the ghats and listens to scriptures which were always forbidden to her since childhood. Now heavily pregnant with a child, Shakuntala is still defiant in her spirit. When a man accuses her of polluting her with her wanton ways though she was merely sitting on the steps of the holy river. She shouts back,

I looked back into his burning eyes, without shame, without fear. He could not reproach me for something I had not done, for someone I was not. I considered stripping off my clothes and walking about that stone parapet as naked and unashamed as he was, with my taut breasts and my swollen belly. Why did he think he could shame me with that look? The scorn turned to anger in his eyes, then surprise, before I walked away. (182)

Though the novel ends on a very poignant note, Shakuntala is hit by a bull straight into her womb and falls on the road with her stomach split wide open. Some may call it a just punishment for a woman who defied the moral conduct prescribed by society. But in the words of the author,

With the sun at half-low, the afternoon stood still. A white light glared down at me. Kind hands held out water in a brass urn, but my mouth tasted of rust and blood and I could not drink. The river roiled and swelled with unease. 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 (207)

And finally when Shakuntala transcends her mortal journey she says:

‘Don’t weep for me, ‘I murmured, to nobody really. I would not weep for my daughter; I would not waste my tears. I had not wasted my life. I had lived’ (208)

Gokhale’s Shakuntala is freed of all the memories that haunted her. Her search for identity comes to a meaningful end and reaches an affirmation. The only reality that exists is the reality of her own existence; both her husband and lover appear to her as shadows. Unlike the previous Shakuntalas, Gokhale has given a meaningful perspective to a woman’s desire and made her heroine truly heroic in terms of her choices in life. There seems to be a haze of meaningless and loss of identity as Shakuntala struggles with human relationships. Right from her mother, husband to lover she continues to fight for her own ‘self’. Her loss of identity affects her relationship and even the material comforts of her marriage fail to satiate her quest for life and the world. It is only when she leaves everything behind afraid of the consequences, does she find herself. Her death affirms her true identity.

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