

# Female Subjectivity and the Politics of Liberation in Namita Gokhale's Oeuvre

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**Abstract:** *Namita Gokhale is recognized as one of the Indian English authors who has used their best creative abilities to express their struggle and dissatisfaction with the situations and uncertain condition that Indian women are constantly placed in. The female characters in her works seem vulnerable to masculine dominance. Gokhale, however, also takes into account the emergence of an empowered and liberated woman as well as the growth of femininity. Her writings reveal a fierce conflict, challenging, questioning, formulating declarations, and honoring their individuality. The study examines the ways in which Namita Gokhale's protagonists use resistance as a potent instrument for self-emancipation, self-determination, and identity formation..*

**Keywords:** Liberation, Empowerment, Femininity, Resistance, Identity, Autonomy, Individuality, Agency

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has long been a site for contesting, negotiating, and reimagining gendered identities. As Indian women writers increasingly articulate their lived realities through fiction, a discernible trajectory emerges—one that traces the contours of female subjectivity against the backdrop of patriarchy, social reform, spirituality, and modernity. Among such writers, Namita Gokhale occupies a significant space in contemporary literary discourse for her nuanced and often subversive representations of women's lives. Her fiction consistently engages with the question of how women perceive themselves and how this self-perception interacts with the larger political and cultural forces that attempt to define, limit, or liberate them. This study titled “Female Subjectivity and the Politics of Liberation in Namita Gokhale's Oeuvre” examines the ways in which Gokhale's women protagonists navigate, resist, and redefine gender roles and identity, situating their experiences within broader discourses of feminist politics, agency, and self-realization.

The notion of female subjectivity has become central to feminist literary criticism. It entails the self-awareness, consciousness, and agency of women as narrative subjects rather than passive objects of male desire or social structures. As Toril Moi posits, “subjectivity is not a given but a site of struggle” (Moi 12). In this sense, literature becomes a crucial arena for female authors to articulate and reclaim the complexities of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Gokhale's oeuvre, which includes novels such as *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016), consistently foregrounds the internal lives of women—their desires, contradictions, resistances, and quests for liberation.

*Paro: Dreams of Passion*, Gokhale's debut novel, serves as a scathing satire on the elite social circles of urban India, while also opening up a critical space for interrogating the commodification of female desire. The character of Paro disrupts conventional gender norms by refusing to be contained by traditional roles. Through her sexual autonomy and unapologetic ambition, she becomes emblematic of a certain kind of liberation—albeit one fraught with its own complexities and contradictions. As Mary E. John argues, “liberation and subjection are not necessarily opposites, but may coexist within the same social field” (John 47). Paro's defiance of societal norms does not always result in fulfillment or happiness, but it marks a conscious assertion of subjectivity that challenges hegemonic narratives of femininity.

In *A Himalayan Love Story*, Gokhale turns her gaze inward, exploring the interior landscape of female emotion, spirituality, and trauma. The protagonist, Parvati, is both a narrator and a seeker—an individual caught between the

sacred and the profane, the personal and the mythic. Here, Gokhale employs a confessional mode of narration that allows readers intimate access to Parvati's consciousness. The novel's nonlinear structure and introspective tone reflect the fluid and fragmentary nature of female identity formation. This aligns with the poststructuralist feminist belief that subjectivity is not monolithic but multiple and dynamic (Butler 30). Gokhale's engagement with myth and memory, especially in this novel, also signals an attempt to locate female agency within Indian cultural and philosophical traditions, thereby challenging the Western notion of feminism as a purely secular and rational discourse.

In *The Book of Shadows*, Gokhale delves into themes of reincarnation, karma, and mystical experience. The novel juxtaposes past and present lives, suggesting that female subjectivity transcends linear time. The protagonist Rachita's journey is not just physical but metaphysical—her quest for meaning and selfhood becomes a spiritual odyssey. As Uma Chakravarti argues, Indian feminism must recognize “the ways in which women's spiritual journeys intersect with their social realities” (Chakravarti 61). Gokhale's blending of feminist consciousness with Hindu metaphysics does not dilute the political edge of her work but rather enriches it by offering an alternative framework for understanding liberation—one that moves beyond materialist conceptions of freedom and into the realm of existential awakening.

*Things to Leave Behind* is perhaps Gokhale's most ambitious novel in terms of scope and historical depth. Set in the nineteenth-century Kumaon region during the colonial period, the novel chronicles the struggles of women who are caught between traditional expectations and emerging modern ideals. Characters like Tilottama and Deoki illustrate the limitations and possibilities for women within a feudal, caste-bound, and colonized society. Gokhale explores how colonialism, nationalism, and social reform movements intersect with the politics of gender. In this historical novel, female subjectivity is not just about personal liberation but also about collective identity and resistance. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes, “the politics of location are crucial to the understanding of feminist subjectivity” (Mohanty 52). By situating her characters within specific socio-political and historical contexts, Gokhale ensures that their struggles for selfhood are not abstract but deeply embedded in material conditions.

Across her body of work, Gokhale engages with diverse feminist concerns—sexual autonomy, spiritual awakening, emotional complexity, social mobility, and historical agency—without reducing her characters to mere symbols. Her fiction offers a rich tapestry of women's voices that resist homogenization. Each narrative provides a different lens through which female subjectivity and liberation can be understood—sometimes as rebellion, sometimes as introspection, and sometimes as a negotiation between competing loyalties. Her writing illustrates that liberation is not a fixed endpoint but a process—a series of conscious choices, acts of resistance, and moments of self-realization.

Furthermore, Gokhale's works challenge binary frameworks that separate the public from the private, the modern from the traditional, or the spiritual from the political. Her nuanced portrayal of female subjectivity moves away from victimhood and toward empowerment, without glossing over the contradictions and constraints that women continue to face. As feminist theorist bell hooks asserts, “liberation is a praxis—it is the action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (hooks 33). In this light, Gokhale's fiction can be seen as both a reflection on and a contribution to the feminist praxis within Indian literature.

This study aims to critically examine Namita Gokhale's oeuvre through the lens of female subjectivity and the politics of liberation. It will analyze how her women characters articulate their identities, resist patriarchal norms, and seek empowerment in various forms—social, sexual, emotional, and spiritual. Drawing on feminist literary theory, postcolonial criticism, and Indian socio-cultural contexts, the research will explore the intersectionality of gender with class, caste, religion, and history in shaping the contours of female selfhood in Gokhale's fiction. In doing so, the study will position Gokhale not merely as a novelist of women's issues but as a significant voice in reimagining the politics of liberation in Indian English literature.

#### Discussion

The acceptable image of women is determined by the will of a man. Allowing women to perform some things also demonstrates male chauvinism since they assume the role of power or the ability to make decisions. The traditional position of a clean housekeeper with a variety of roles inside the family has been replaced by women's employment as perfect companions. On the one hand, women are depicted as exceptional, flawless, and ideal creatures; on the other hand, they are seen as weak and in need of men's assistance in order to live fulfilling lives. Men are positioned as rulers

or experts because they are represented as creatures that always want male approval since they are not believed to be able to choose between good and evil.

The topics of women giving their perspectives to the world are central to the works of many Indian women authors. Namita Gokhale attempts to shatter the glass that the stereotyped lady is cast in her paintings. Individualistic, strong, and exceptional, her female characters are strong and commanding. Namita Gokhale on the state of women in the nation:

...nothing has changed. In the past, ladies would try to be amiable, typical marriage material. In order to ensure that they would consistently twist and not stand straight, girls from wealthy households were required to carry one large towel in their luggage. In order to seem slender and glamorous all the time, they were instructed to adopt a slightly bent posture. Doing everything all the time is a futile exercise. I'm not against that; rather, I'm against the whole idea of becoming someone you're not and fitting into a mold. That's what I find, I believe, somewhere in all of my writings, which tries to subtly encourage women to be normal, unrestrained, and straightforward.

In her writings, Namita Gokhale has depicted amazing female characters. In addition to Indianess, her works capture women's viewpoints. Names that are listed as brave include Paro, Parvati, and Sakuntala. Gokhale has really shown life's realities. Her female characters are always in a state of self-discovery and self-expression. As Dr. Rashmi Gaur accurately notes:

...Namita Gokhale shows herself to be a dedicated feminist writer. Her portrayal of the insensitive fatality of possibilities that society has shamefully granted its women has been effective. The popularity of the work may be attributed to her ability to effectively capture the aspirations, anxieties, worries, and conflicts of the modern educated woman.

The reality of life in Bombay and Delhi are shown in Paro: Dreams of Passion, along with the desire for one another between Priya and Paro. Throughout the book, Paro is shamelessly herself, doesn't exhibit odd anxiety, and ends up in a terrible place. The kind of lady that keeps her family together is Priya. In the middle of the two is the ideal lady. They both serve as counterpoints to one another. The way Paro and Priya are portrayed is really important. By entangling wealthy people in society, Paro is portrayed seeking pleasure. One by one, she seduces and enlists them, lives a passionate life, relishes their company, takes advantage of them, and eventually meets a horrible end. The book takes the shape of a journal that Priya kept as a memoir. In line with Matthew Arnold's suggestion, she believes she has the ability "to see the object as it is." In response to B. R.'s question regarding the purpose of this journal, she says:

"Is it a love story?" he asked teasingly. "No," I (Priya) said.

"What is it about, then?"

"Passion, boredom, vanity and jealousy," I said finally... "Come, Love, tell me what it's about," he said. "Liberation," I hazarded. (Paro 135)

Although Paro was an authoritative, independent, bold, and self-reliant woman, the burning of the edge of the pallu of Priya's saree from Paro's funeral pyre is suggestive and serves as a warning to Priya and readers that the path Paro took leads to a dead end and should not be followed.

The novel's title, A Himalayan Love Story, is really a lie. The novel explores the difficulties of sexual desire, the suffocation of a chilly, cramped arranged marriage, the anguish of failing to find love despite repeated attempts, and the despair that plagues the main character, Parvati. She has a pitiful and regrettable existence. All her life, she has been deprived of love and respect. She is married to a homosexual guy who is unable to satisfy her both emotionally and physically since she was unable to marry the man she loved. Her life is made worse by the regular reminders of her sexy encounters with Salman, her history professor.

My wedding night with Lalit plunged us both into the deepest melancholy after the sexual joy I had experienced with Salman. The occasion's propriety required longing glances, a gentle evaluation of the bride by the eager husband, and then, ideally, getting down to business. I felt true passion, and this charade made me feel nothing but contempt. My young spouse kept a defiant, wary distance from me, looking perplexed and burdened. (Gokhale 32-33)

Shakuntala: Shakuntala, the protagonist of the story, conveys the concepts of the birth-burn in The Play of Memory. Kalidasa's Abhigyanam Shakuntalam served as the inspiration for the storyline. In this story, a young lady called Shakuntala discovers the mystery of her past life via the blind priest and accepts it as such. It focuses on restating the

idea of memory and desire, much as the novel's subtitle. Many commentators have drawn comparisons between this book and Herman Hesse's

Siddhartha. Shakuntala remembers being vivacious, daring, and creative, but she was doomed to suffer at the hands of "the samskaras of abandonment." She is suspicious and jealous of her husband Srijan's loyalty. He then sends in a second lady dressed as a housekeeper to help her. Shakuntala pretends to be Yaduri, a broken lady who forsakes her family and her responsibilities in order to befriend a Greek traveler she encounters on the Ganga banks. They had a good time traveling to Kashi together, and she enjoys herself. Despite being pregnant, she desires her independence. She eventually had to leave this planet due to anger and frustration. "A unique and heartbreaking novel, Shakuntala captivates in its vivid depiction of the tragic life of a woman whose desire to live on her terms is thwarted at every turn by circumstance and the age in which she lives," the Telegraph writes of the book. Namita Gokhale creates a timeless narrative that transcends its ancient context by fusing history, religion, and philosophy with her amazing storytelling talent.

The framework of the book *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother* is well designed. The grandmother, Ammi, is the most realistic character in the book since she understands how to make things work. Despite being a Muslim, she starts a temple after settling on a lonely roadside nook in the Delhi suburbs. She first gains fame as a Bhajan singer before becoming Mataji, the mandir's beloved saint. The narrative recounts Gudiya's life. In order to define her individuality and symbolize a complex history, she renames herself Pooja Abhimanyu Singh. After her spouse, Kalki, left her, she showed her true self. She sends her spouse away with her own money and "stridhan." I had no male role models to educate me about female reliance. His (Kalki) absence offers a chance for development and escape. His grip on me gradually loosened, because love is not life. (Gokhale 224–225)

The book *The Book of Shadows* is a self-portrayal. The narrative of brave Rachita is told in the book. Her fiancé, Anand, committed himself, and his sister splashed acid on her as payback. This attack distorts and tortures her. She suffers from emotional harm that is much more severe than physical discomfort. For solace and mental tranquility, she retreats to her childhood home in Ranikhet. She must see many thrilling events in that residence while surrounded by the stunning, amazing, picaresque abundance of nature. Rachita eventually rises from the shadow—that is, the momentary sadness facing reality—after enduring a great deal of bodily and psychological suffering.

I'm not sure whether these memories will hold up in the ever-changing outer world. If nothing else changes, this hillside will, and so will the snow mountains that guard us. The weeds and forget-me-nots near the gravel road, as well as the roses by the veranda, will all be back in bloom. I believe I am aware that I will stay. (Gokhale 232).

Priya: In the book *Incredible Indyaais*, Namita Gokhale revives a few Paro characters. Priya, who has now ascended the social scale, narrates the narrative once again; her husband is the Minister of State directly. She still recalls her early days in Bombay, however. Luv and Kush, her two little twin boys, are now her children. Priya understands just where to establish an endpoint, even if she is the ultimate mother handling her son's aspirations. Despite their divergent viewpoints, Priya is certain that she is supporting her husband. Even though she is beyond menopause, she still enjoys having sex with B.R. She enjoys getting dressed, wearing deep-neck shirts with sarees, and is equally fond of Dior purses and Gucci sunglasses. She is successful in creating a niche for herself and her own personality.

How can I explain the lack of a plot? It never is. A housewife's story is formed by simply continuing day after day, revealing a secret harmony. The storyboard's drama and heroism are found in the little victories and daily annoyances. Additionally, the joyful endings sneak in so covertly that by the time they appear on screen, you could have already left the multiplex. (Priya 193)

First and foremost, *Things to Leave Behind* is a book about women's fight against their subordination to men and how this entire situation shapes a woman's character or uniqueness while she is restricted inside the parameters of the guy who maintains her under his control. The protagonist of the book, Tilottama, is an intriguing and gregarious figure. The book reveals that her controlling personality also makes her husband, Nain Chand Joshi, feel depressed and frightened. One such unique individual who admits to finding her daughter uninteresting is Tilottama. She remains at home while her husband goes on his adventures, dresses like him, gets sideburns and a mustache, and smokes cheroots. She also holds lengthy conversations with herself in made-up English and hires an instructor to teach her Sanskrit and arithmetic. She leaves her daughter behind to read books. Namita Gokhale uses the figure of Tilottama to represent a

woman's pursuit of knowledge, her defiance of social standards, and the route that leads to her empowerment and independence.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

In her literature, Namita Gokhale depicts women defending their honor and self-respect. Her female leads are portrayed as strong, independent women. Her female characters' self-care, nail art, and hair hennaing all allude to their desire to erase memories and pursue a better, more promising future. She has the ability to authentically and sincerely portray her feminine characters with a female perspective. They maintain their femininity throughout all of her books. She focuses on the potential and calls for social fairness for women. According to Gokhale, a woman is not to be seen as a mere toy, a manifestation of desire, or a fleeting pleasure, but rather as a man's equal and esteemed partner. Women must see and learn about themselves, according to Namita Gokhale.

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