



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Re-interpretation of the Image of a 'Fallen Woman': A Study of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

Pankaj Solanki

Research Scholar (M.Phil)

Dept. of English & Foreign languages,
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak,
Haryana.

Abstract:

Shakuntala is a well known mythical character of the *Mahabharata*. In Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, she is portrayed as a symbol of devotion and upholding of familial values in Indian society. She remains a fatalist character accepting her lot when she is abandoned first by her real parents and later by her husband Dushyanta. However, looking from a feminist perspective, her story is a narrative of a male ideology. Her subdued role conveys many underlying meanings of female position in Indian society.

This research article is a study of Namita Gokhale's novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* in which she presents a narrative of challenge by portraying a woman character in contrast with a legendary namesake. It tries to re-interpret the stereotypical image of a 'Fallen Woman'.

Keywords: Fallen Woman, Subordinate, Male Ideology, Images, Feminist, Self, Identity

Since times immemorial male has dominated the domain of art and literature. He has given full expression to his dreams and desires. However, female has remained subordinate in his works. "In this pseudo-moral system of male-dominated society a woman has been the victim of male-hypocrisy, exploitation and violence since the earliest times but she could not freely narrate or openly discuss these experiences"(Srivastava 1). Women have remained confined to some social constructs which restrict them to domestic domain. "Three false faces of women are: the Goddess, the Mother and the Doll. History is replete with stories of suffering women. The woman has been an Immaculate conception conceived by man" (Sharma). A woman who takes these roles is admired as noble and respected. Anti-image of these conventionally disseminated images is that of a 'fallen woman.'

The term 'fallen woman' finds its roots in theology. It was used to describe a woman who lost 'her innocence' and fallen from the grace of God. According to Biblical mythology Eve is the prototype of a fallen woman. She fell from a state of innocence because she ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Moreover, she is blamed that she incited Adam for incest (as Eve was created out of Adam's rib, he was her biological father) that resulted into the fall of man.

With the passage of time, the meaning of this term came to be closely associated with the loss of a woman's chastity. In art and literature, the theme of fallen woman came into prevalence, particularly, in the Victorian era. In this era woman was attributed with some specific societal and moral codes of conduct. These codes restricted her to the threshold in the

male dominated society. The woman who followed those codes was admired as an angel. However, if she tried to cross the threshold, she was treated as a 'fallen woman.'

No doubt there had always been some women writers also but they had to follow the patterns devised by men. They could not articulate their true self. It was only with the emergence of feminist movement in the West, the emancipated women started expressing their emotions and experiences. In India also, many women authors have emerged with their own narrative of a new woman. This new woman is determined to oppose the male domination, sexual harassment and to give full expression of her emotional and moral self. She has a strong urge to assert her emancipated self and autonomy. She demands the equal rights which so far have been the monopoly of male.

Namita Gokhale is one of the most prominent feminist writers today. She is the author of six novels, a collection of short stories and several other non-fictional works. Her interest in mythical studies is well known. She is taking great pains in analyzing and re-interpreting the myths and their impacts on the lives of Indian women. She shares an equal rank with Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Shobha De and many other feminist writers who through their writings project the image of a new woman. N.M. Nigam in her study of Namita's fiction opines that "Namita Gokhale, in her novels, has tried to illustrate how can a woman use her power to create a space for her existence."

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory, Namita Gokhale's fifth novel, is a challenging work of Indian-English fiction. Like the remakes of films there may be re-invention and re-interpretation of old myths embodied in literary works. In her masterpiece *Shakuntala*, Namita Gokhale has portrayed the story of a woman named after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. In contrast to her legendary namesake, she is bold, spirited and imaginative. Right from her childhood she is conscious of the discrimination towards female. In her marriage with a mahasamant, Srijan, she feels suffocated by social customs. Hungry for experience she deserts home to travel with a Greek horse merchant, Nearchus. Together they travel far and wide and surrender to unbridled pleasures. Shakuntala assumes the identity of Yaduri: the 'fallen woman.' But she forsakes this life as well to meet her tragic doom.

"A name is not just a name. It carries an extra linguistic overload, which may be termed "cultural baggage". Especially so it is in Indian where our names come from mythology" (Angadi 37). A male is named after the names of virtuous kings or gods while female is named after the names of goddesses or those women who are supposed to be loving, compassionate, disciplined and are ready to sacrifice their lives for the welfare of family and society. Sita, Savitri, Luxmi, Sarswati and Parvati are some of those names which come to the mind at the birth of a female child. However no parents name their daughter as Draupadi or Kaikaiyi.

The narrator of Namita's novel recounts "I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama" (Gokhale 6). From the very beginning of her life she is loaded with an expectation to become a virtuous woman like her legendary namesake. However, by taking the same name, Namita Gokhale presents a narrative of challenge. Writing from a feminist perspective, she tries to re-interpret the concept of a 'fallen woman.' Feminists have proposed that the 'fall' is not something concrete; rather it is an abstract term. A woman who dares to oppose and challenges the societal norms is supposed to be a 'fallen woman.' In reality it is just

the fall of an image which was attributed to her so far. Simone de Beauvoir, in her *Second Sex* asserts that the term 'woman' itself is a social construct:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (267)

These feminist views inspire one and all to think about the female, her psyche and present a fresh critique today. The narrative of challenge of a woman works on mainly two levels: one, she opposes the conventional stereotypes and secondly, she takes bold decisions on her own.

Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala*, by nature, is passionate, lively and enthusiastic to see the world "with the freedom of birds and clouds" (Gokhale 9). She loves the wood, rivers, mountains and risky games. 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 forget, the vessel of your virtue is like urn of water you balance on your head," she would say. "You must not spill even a drop as you carry it home!" (Gokhale 40)

Right from her childhood, *Shakuntala* pays for being a female. She is conscious of the discrimination towards female. While her brother is given all opportunities to acquire knowledge and experience; she is denied of it. Her mother tries to teach her household works and about herbs and plants. Her hatred for her mother is seen when she remembers about her:

She tried to teach me something of this meager knowledge but I resisted her attempts with an anger so violent that it sometimes surprised me. 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. (Gokhale 8)

She has a deep urge for knowledge and experience. Spirit of rebellion goes simultaneously in her. She tries to listen to her brother's lessons secretly. She admits that "Reluctantly coping with the drudgery of daily life, I would evade household work to eavesdrop on my brother's lessons" (Gokhale 16). On the day of her first menstruation, her mother locks her in a store room beside the cowshed lest she defiles the purity of the home. She breaks out and moved by a spirit of sheer rebellion, walks the reverse path, away from the home. She returns home only when her anger comes down.

Later, *Shakuntala* is married to *Srijan*, whose earlier two wives were dead. Now she is expected to be a dutiful wife. She is instructed to "look at the earth" and to keep her "gaze down and appear modest" (Gokhale 39). At their wedding night, *Srijan* tries to show her the *Arundhati* star:

Look beyond that tree, *Shakuntala* ... 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 the star by my guidance, so I shall guide you in our life together towards the vision of right and wrong. (Gokhale 42)

Shakuntala being rebellious by nature lies that she cannot see the star. For many years they enjoy a pleasant conjugal life. However, the thirst for knowledge keeps lying deep in her heart.

‘What does a woman’s heart want?’ is a long debated question. Man has mostly failed to answer this question. One of the misunderstandings about woman is that “A woman is to be loved, not understood” (Osho 1). Srijan has a liking for Shakuntala even before their marriage when he saw her for the first listening secretly to her brother’s lessons. He loves her but he too fails to understand her. At her curiosity about new things or places, he says “You are an odd woman’ ... ‘You do not care for ornaments or rich garments or a man’s flattering words” (Gokhale 50). He fails to understand her feminine psyche which deals with quest for identity, her deep emotions, and her concern with herself and her own point of view.

There are certain factors responsible for Shakuntala’s ‘fall’ in societal sense. The first is her inability to conceive. For many years of her marriage she finds herself unable to bear a child. Generally in every society, particularly in Indian, motherhood is glorified excessively. The Manava Dharma Shastra professes that “a barren wife should be abandoned in the tenth year” (Gokhale 95). It is rooted so deeply in the psyche of people that even women themselves internalize this concept that a woman who is unable to become a mother, lacks in her duty. Shakuntala also feels guilty saying that “I was painfully aware that I had been lagging in my duties as a wife” (Gokhale 49).

Although she is never tortured or taunted by her husband for this; but she remains conscious that he is anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre. Situation becomes worse when her husband, returning from his journey, brings back a woman, Kamalini, as a hand maiden with him. However, she neither behaves nor works as a hand maiden. Shakuntala becomes suspicious of her. It results in a gap between the husband and wife. Shakuntala, being jealous of the other woman, falls from the emotional to the physical level. The trust between the couple is replaced by a physical need. Shakuntala very boldly admits that:

...I set about seducing my husband, shuddering and moaning like a harlot, writhing and turning. My yoni was the only part of my body which was still alive, all pain, joy and hope concentrated in that one orifice. (Gokhale 88)

However, it is not here that she becomes a ‘fallen woman’ morally in societal sense. Here she is ‘fallen’ only from the emotional level. The real cause behind her ‘fall’ is her desire for knowledge. Like Eve of the Biblical myth, Shakuntala too wants to taste the fruit of knowledge. She was hungry for experience. Time and again, throughout the novel, she comes to self realization that:

I knew there was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, ideas. It was as if the move from my mother’s home to my husband’s—the half-a-day journey from one village to another—had suddenly made the impossible possible. 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?* (Gokhale 48)

In Shakuntala, we meet a woman who has always seen herself aloof from her life. Her conditioning demands from her confinement in the four walls of her household. She is supposed to become a doll. However, she has a strong urge to come out of the threshold. It is for this reason that she denies to take the role of a doll. She abandons her married life to ride off with a Greek traveler, Nearchus. With him she travels from cities to cities watching new lands and

people. With Nearchus, she enjoys a passionate physical relationship. She confesses honestly that:

As his lips touch my earlobe, my stomach contracts over with desire. His mouth moves to mine, the kiss searching so deep that when at last I disentangle myself, something of me is left behind in him forever. (Gokhale 111)

However, Sex for her is not any compulsion or mechanical phenomenon—it is something higher. At this stage it becomes a sort of emotional fulfillment and a medium of self realization. With him she travels from cities to cities watching new lands and people. They travel along the banks of the Ganga. On their travel they pass through Kanauj and Mahakashala, through forests and fields. Nearchus tells her of the sands of Lybia, the river Egyptos, and Constantinople, the city of his birth. He talks of Kabul, Kandhar and the mountains of the Hindu Kush.

Shakuntala abandons her name and past identity. Now she 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” (Gokhale 119). It is on this stage she becomes a real ‘fallen woman’ in societal and moral sense. From a wife, she now is little more than a whore. Her relationship with Nearchus also goes on proving itself disappointing. The initial excitement declines with the passage of time. He starts hurting and abusing her. Shakuntala herself is aware of her position. She admits that:

His coarse words only excited me the more. They confirmed my discovery that I was a fallen woman, and something in me exulted and rejoiced in being so. (Gokhale 130)

Although she surrenders to the unbridled pleasures with Nearchus; yet she is not satisfied. Her real desire is not that of sex. It is for knowledge and her quest for self. She becomes disillusioned when she realizes that she is again becoming a doll in Nearchus’ hands. Consequently she abandons him too to travel further on her own. Now she is nobody’s daughter, nobody’s sister, nobody’s wife or mistress.

Wandering in Kashi, the city of her dreams, she meets with her tragic death. She is hit to death by a raged bull. A Buddhist nun takes her to a vihar. Here, in the last hours of her life, she contemplates on all her decisions. She reasons for going with Nearchus, saying “He recognized some part of my mind and spirit that others did not” (Gokhale 172). She asserts that she had set out in search of herself, “I had set out in search of part of myself, and it had eluded me. I had not traded one life for another” (Gokhale 194).

Throughout her life, she goes on rejecting those societal and moral conventions which are supposed to be followed by a virtuous woman. In her last moments too, she denies accepting Buddha and dies boldly. In this doom, she gets her redemption:

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

D.T. Angadi, in her study of this novel, beautifully sums up in these words:

As per Shakuntala's name, the linguistic overload and cultural baggage it carried, the novel's heroine by accident, not by design, over throws the debris of a previous birth (as if she as Kalidasa's Shakuntala once), and seeks her own freedom to do what she liked, to travel as men did, of course she pays for it; but she has also gained from it what was worth a king's ransom. (45)

Namita Gokhale delves deep in the psychology of her characters. In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, in the end, she skillfully portrays Shakuntala's soul abandoning her body. This liberated soul narrates the last chapter of the novel. In her 'fall' she becomes liberated from her material body which was subjected to the societal images. It is symbolic of Shakuntala's transcending the familial, societal and physical barriers to realize her true self. Namita Gokhale emerges as a unique genius to re-interpret the cursed image of a 'fallen woman' as a kind of rebel in favour of women to establish their true self. She, breaking the metaphor of 'fallen woman', has successfully presented a narrative of challenge through this novel.

Works Cited:

- Angadi, D.T. "What's in a Name? A perspective on Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*." *Feminist Psyche in World Women Novelists*. Ed. N. Shantha Naik. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publications, 2012. 37-52. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Gokhale, Namita. *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.
- Nigam, N.M. "Feminist Consciousness in Namita Gokhale." *Feminine Psyche: A Post-Modern Critique*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008. 53-59. Print.
- Osho. *The Book of Woman*. Gurgaon: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- Sharma, Vinod Bala. Foreword. *Feminine Psyche: A Post-Modern Critique*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008. V-vi. Print.
- Srivastava, Sharad. *The New Woman In Indian English Fiction: A Study of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale & Shobha De*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996. Print.