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Absurdism in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

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Abstract

Namita Gokhale, an Indian woman writer, editor and publisher is the winner of Sahitya Academy Award of 2021 for her novel, *Things to Leave Behind*. She is well-known for her craftsmanship while writing. Namita Gokhale's concern in her novels is to showcase the reality of women in contemporary society. Her characters are lifelike and dynamic which make her fiction more appealing. Her debut novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) is about aspirations of a woman amidst the patriarchal set up of the society. The present paper aims at analyzing the element of absurdism in Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2005). The novel focuses on the elements of absurdism such as alienation, sufferings, meaninglessness of existence and loss. It shows how the characters in the novel lead an existence which makes no concrete sense. Their life is not under their control. The social conditions do not allow them to live a life of their own and their wishes and desires remain unfulfilled.

Key Words: Absurdism, Patriarchy, Alienation, Sufferings, Sorrows and meaninglessness.

Namita Gokhale has established herself as one of India's greatest feminist writers. Her writing is a kind of re-visiting Indian mythology. Her novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* was published in 2005 in which she uses Kalidasa's immortal tale of love and betrayal to discuss the status of women in Indian society. It is one of her well discussed novels. As Jyotsna Agnihotri-Gupta asserts, "Gokhale has successfully interwoven religion,

social history, and a timeless tale to produce a novel that stands out for its rich narrative text. It is undoubtedly one of her best works so far" (56-57). Based on the story from the classic play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* written by the fifth century Indian poet Kalidasa, the novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* renders the theme of alienation, sufferings and loss, the characteristics of absurdism. It narrates the journey of a woman at the backdrop of patriarchy. As the protagonist herself asserts,

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was a nymph, daughter of the celestial Menaka who seduced the sage Vishwamitra and stole his seed. That Shakuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her birth – father Vishwamitra, and later by her husband Dushyanta – one could say that she carried within herself the *samskaras* of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name (6-7).

The novel narrates absurdity in the life of the female protagonist Shakuntala as well as other characters like her husband Srijan and her lover. Shakuntala is troubled by patriarchal social customs; she does not receive true love from her husband. So, she indulges in unbridled pleasures with Nearchus whom she meets in the temple, and tries to seek true love from outside marriage. But her attempt was not successful. Her desire to lead a happy life with her lover remains meaningless. In the beginning of the novel, the readers see Shakuntala remembering her first sight of Kashi. She begins to dream of her previous birth. In her dreams, she sees many images and begins to think of the purpose of life. Shakuntala accepts the belief that to die in Kashi is to escape the cycle of birth and death. But Shakuntala who dies in the city of Shiva, the destroyer of memory, has not forgotten her previous life. She remembers that Shakuntala was the daughter of a *Vaidya*, a doctor of medicinal plants, and her mother had learnt a little about healing from him. Her father died when she was only five years old. She had a brother only a year older than her. Shakuntala had a keen desire to

know her inner self. She was a courageous child and felt no fear while she walked alone in the forest. She grew up in a mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic. Unlike her legendary namesake Shakuntala is bold, passionate and imaginative. Although she is expected to become a virtuous woman, she finds nothing wrong in disorder and challenging societal norms. She has deep urge for "natural condition of life" and "spirit of rebellion" (Solanki 82).

Shakuntala marries to Srijan as his third wife. His other wives were dead and had not given him any children. Srijan was a *mahasamant*, a rich man, the chief of fourteen villages. Srijan's mother followed the path of Buddha. She has become a nun and shaved her hair before she died. The married life of Shakuntala was decent and Srijan was very courteous to her. But she was expected to be a dutiful wife. She enjoys a happy married life for many years. Her husband Srijan provides her all the comforts at home. However, she doesn't feel satisfied; "the thirst for knowledge keeps lying deep in her heart" (Solanki 82).

Srijan was anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre. Shakuntala was unable to bear a child for him. Being an Indian woman Shakuntala thinks that she has not been successful in performing her duties as a wife. She feels guilty for her inability to beget a child. At the very time, Srijan brings a woman named Kamalini as a hand maiden. But Shakuntala is suspicious about the woman; she does not like her arrival to their home. Slowly, the situation worsens and there comes a gap between Shakuntala and Srijan. Though Srijan loved Shakuntala very much, Shakuntala was constantly troubled by the questions – who is the woman? Why has Srijan brought her into their household? When she knows that Kamalini had a child, a handsome boy, she is afraid and experiences fear. At first she thinks to be a monk or nun like Srijan's mother. But she rejects the whole idea to follow the course of Srijan's mother as she thinks becoming a nun would be a defeat to Kamalini.

Jealous of the woman Kamalini, Shakuntala walks away towards the temple where she worships the river, and gets fascinated towards a man, Nearchus. The gap between Shakuntala and Srijan grows more. She falls from all the levels and enjoys physical pleasure. As a result, Shakuntala gets pregnant and her husband loves her very much. Her free will, rebellious spirit instills fascination more for physical pleasure Nearchus. Now she does not care for her husband or her home. She leaves her home to fulfill her thirst for knowledge and the desire to travel. Thus, Shakuntala represents women who have a strong desire to "come out of the threshold". "She abandons her married life to ride off with her lover-traveler" (Solanki 83). With him, Shakuntala travels to many cities—Kashi, Patliputra, Mathura, Magadha, Mithila etc. She enjoys the physical pleasure, a way of love-making which is not a mechanical phenomenon to her but something higher. Though sometimes her lover is rough and coarse, yet she is happy in his company. She abandons her home, past and identity. But after sometime she is fed up with this new life of a socially and morally fallen woman. When she watches Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* enacted, she remembers her past. Now, Shakuntala realizes that she betrayed her husband. So, furthermore she does not want to live in the company of that Yavana, physical pleasure. She comes to Kashi. Now she is all alone. There she meets her death being hit by a raged bull.

Shakuntala had her own vision of freedom. She does not want to be a doll in the hands of a man. She feels disillusioned when she realizes that she is becoming a doll in the hands of her husband and later in the hands of her lover-traveler. She leaves both of them to travel more; her quest for knowledge and her true self is her desire. She had an irresistible hunger to see new lands and people and said: "I knew there was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, and 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" (48). Shakuntala is very curious about

the world outside. She is open-minded to meet new people, places and experiences. For some women, marriage may be a painful experience because it separates a daughter from her parents. But for Shakuntala it was not so. As P. Gokula Priya observes, "The institution of marriage is considered as a peerless significance in the life of a woman. Especially in the life of an Indian woman it marks a point of maturity and signifies the flowering of life. On the contrary to this, Shakuntala looks at it as a way to rebel and release herself from the ill-treatment of her mother" (61). Shakuntala prepares herself for marriage so that she can enjoy her life on her own terms. As she thinks, "I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation" (18). Marriage is always considered as a means of security for a woman. Unfortunately, the protagonist Shakuntala does not feel happy in marriage too. Her happy married life is ruined due to her inability to conceive a child. Since Srijan was left without an heir from his previous marriages he wanted a child from Shakuntala. Various rituals were performed as foretold by astrologers and pundits. Shakuntala felt very sad over her inability to conceive. Once when Srijan returned from his travels, he returned with a woman who was beautiful. She had been brought as the handmaiden of Shakuntala. But Shakuntala did not like her arrival and went to the Matrika Temple. She thought that the woman was a temptress. Her marital life is disturbed when her husband brings Kamalini home. He rebukes, "Shakuntala, don't ask me any questions. She has been brought here as your handmaid and that's all" (58).

The presence of Kamalini is challenging for the existence of Shakuntala. She feels betrayed and frustrated. Her condition shows the reality in the life of women in male dominated Indian society. Shakuntala reveals her sense of loss due to Kamalini, as she says,

I was not angry with Srijan – he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. But the hurt and betrayal, the prickling of thorns under the sheath of my skin – I had never known or anticipated these feelings, just as I

had never expected my husband to return from his journey to the east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes (58).

In the month of *Vaishakh*, she went to the temple of Gangadwar. Kamalini was also with her. But when she went there, everything was changed to her. The escape of Shakuntala from the comfortable confines of her home and her role as a wife happens through the agency of an individual whom she chances upon while returning from her visit to the Shiva shrine. She said: "My life has changed; I feel that I cannot go back to where I have come from. Every limb in my body is alive, and yet I am rested and satiated. Nothing has prepared me for this ecstasy. It defies my life and destiny, disengaging it from the wheel of duty and what should be, throwing it directly into my own hands" (30). Shakuntala's encounter with Nearchus, a Greek traveler and merchant proves as a turning point in her life. He is enticed with Shakuntala's beauty. She too finds Nearchus as her soul mate and breaks all the falsehoods of marriage. She does not think about the norms of marriage and becomes a free woman who follows her own aspirations. Her physical relationship with Nearchus is also an exciting one which motivates her and therefore she travels with him exploring the world as well as her own self. She travels many cities, enjoys exploring new world and new people. However, Shakuntala eventually feels regretful about her own decision to escape from marriage. Her sense of regret shows the long lived impact of social bonding inflicted upon the psyche of women. As she remarks,

Even in the moment of her disgrace, Kalidasa's Shakuntala had the sanctity of the secret marriage. But I had betrayed everything. I had renounced my name; I was no longer Shakuntala, only Yaduri, the unmentionable one; 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 lovemaking with Shakuntala. The *apsara* Menaka whose daughter Shakuntala was, had seduced the

great sage Vishwamitra – but then she was an immortal, and such deeds are permitted to nymphs and celestials. Only I stood condemned (150).

Shakuntala sees herself as an ordinary woman. She compares her past with her present situation. She is in conflict whether to attach to her previous marriage or to accept the romantic relationship with the traveler. She travels a lot. However, she remembers her home and she feels nostalgic. In her own words, “My eyes fill with tears. The world is a large place. It is too large for me. I want to go home” (166). The lines clearly indicate her helplessness and her failure in her journey towards self realization. Her sufferings, sense of loneliness and loss of relationship with her husband as well as her lover Nearchus make her life more absurd. At the end, she misses her cow Dasyu. Their warm cattle odour reminded her of home and her eyes were filled with tears. “I thought of Dasyu, and her calf. Did they miss, or even remember, me? Just this thought, and I could almost taste the clotted curds and fresh butter of the mountains” (188).

Shakuntala’s wanderings on the streets of Kashi and finally her death re-assert the importance of morality for a woman in marriage. Her sorry state reveals the bitter truth of Indian society that a woman is honoured when she is married and proves herself faithful to her husband and his family. If not then it becomes very difficult for her to sustain outside marriage. Shakuntala goes across to the right shore of Ganga in a boat and when on the right bank, she meets her death being hit by a charging bull. She says,

I strayed distractedly into the middle of the lane, and found myself directly in the path of a charging bull that appeared as though from nowhere...A chanting of sacred verses rose from afar; perhaps a procession of monks. The bull bowed its head to me, as if asking forgiveness, before the city shuddered in my vision and pain flashed in my eyes like the light of a thousand suns. There was blood everywhere: a torn womb, where my life and my daughter had been, now destroyed. As though to establish it

was only doing its duty, the bull once again buried its horns in my stomach. The blood rushed out from my abdomen like a fountain, searing my face, my hands, and my feet (188).

Shakuntala's death is symbolic and carries different interpretations. In Hindu mythology, the place Kashi is considered as a holy place. If anyone dies there he/she receives *moksha*. In these terms one can understand that Shakuntala too attains *moksha* through suffering a lot till the end. At the same time it has another meaning too. It shows the pitiable condition of a woman who rejects to be a doll and does not follow the codes and conducts of a society, finds no one around at her funeral. Her existence remains meaningless. Her words: "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" (208), asserts her own realization that at least she lived a life of her own. Namita Gokhale has tried to assert the psyche and identity of her female characters. Her females though believe in the social norms, rituals and traditions, they always aspire for individual freedom. Her portrayal of females is a mixture of tradition and modernity. As R. Sarathkumar and Dr. M. Kannadhasan write,

Being a woman, Gokhale feels more for the female characters and can understand better the mundane reality and the complex structure of man-woman relationship. The theme of relationships is a part of Namita Gokhale's larger social outlook. She is essentially a humanist. Her feminism is rooted in the socio-cultural ethos of India, which embraces modernity with a traditional outlook. It is her desire to explore the human condition beyond the relationships that exist in the traditional family system (23).

Gokhale tries to show the complexities of human desires. It is true that she has emphasized more on delineation of female characters. The female protagonist Shakuntala represents the women community which suffers a lot due to norms and traditions in the

society. She attempts to find out her place in society. However, it remains unsuccessful. As Meenakshi Saini and Shalini Vohra observe, "The novelist depicts her as a female protagonist with her heightened physical, sexual, emotional, aesthetic, romantic and questing needs. But her male characters delineate the needs and greets of his wife or beloved. This temperamental gap leads to alienation and frustration to the women characters" (137-138).

To conclude, through the character of Shakuntala, the novel focuses on the aspects of absurdism like meaninglessness, sufferings, alienation and loss that a woman of free will faces. Though the protagonist Shakuntala is successful in her attempt to assert her own identity through her escape from meaningless marriage, she does not find bliss in her romantic relationship with the traveler. It too remains temporary to her. She regrets and suffers from loss at the end of the novel, and faces her death boldly. As the narrator writes,

She faces reality with a sense of remorse. With a child in her womb, her body ripped apart and lying in a pool of blood, 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; in anger she broods over the past and recalls it with a sense of remorse (64).

Thus, the protagonist Shakuntala aspires to live a life of her own which she gets but for some time. Her marriage is unsuccessful partially because of a lack of understanding between her and her husband, and partially because of her nature of free will. She refuses to be a doll governed by societal code and conducts. She betrays her husband by establishing a love relationship outside marriage. And lastly she leaves the traveler-lover too. All this indicates that a woman of free will and imaginative spirit faces an absurd life suffering from meaningless, loneliness and loss which are the most significant elements of absurdism. The novel discusses a journey of such a female protagonist in the atmosphere of patriarchy. Shakuntala's attempt to seek happiness in marriage remains meaningless. When she finds her

marriage futile, she even takes a bold decision to find sensual pleasure outside marriage. That too disappoints her. However, her thrust knowledge and quest for self takes her nowhere. She feels disillusioned and lost, and finds herself full of regret at the end.

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