ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to depict the theme of Namita Gokhale’s “Shakuntala: A Play of Memory”. It portrays the aspects of Hindu Mythology and gives the belief in rebirth. The notions of the birth-cycle are described through the life of Shakuntala, the protagonist of the novel. The question of equality of women with men has been raised here. It is centered around a woman’s vision of freedom. They are suppressed in male dominated society. It shows quest of a woman who wants to know about Hindu scriptures.

KEYWORDS: Equality, Hindu Mythology, Rebirth, Scriptures, Suppressed.

INTRODUCTION

Namita Gokhale’s novel Shakuntala: The Play of Memory is one of the best works she has written in the last fifteen years. She has established her reputation as one of India’s greatest feminist writers. Her interest in Indian mythology is well known. She felt indebted to the great poet Kalidasa. Kalidasa was the brightest jewel in the court of King Vikramaditya of Ujjaini. Her novel Shakuntala is based on the story of the famous play Abhijnana Shakuntalam written by Kalidas. In this novel Namita Gokhale has presented the story of a girl named Shakuntala who remembered her past life. The writer has belief in rebirth and the Hindu mythology. According to Hindu mythology, it is considered that the soul never dies as it is immortal. Like Plato and Pythagoras and Wordsworth, Namita Gokhale also believed in the transmigration of the soul.
The novel opens with the picture of Kashi, the city of Shiva. The narrator is Shakuntala who remembers 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. What is death? What is the mystery of life? What do we live for? Why do me die? Can one run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river ever slake its waters? She asks the priest on the Ghat – Why do these memories persist? 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. The astrologer had foretold that he would be a great sage. So her mother always looked after her son, properly and ensured that he got the opportunities he deserved. Since childhood Shakuntala was a thoughtful girl who used to think about her name as she said:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa’s classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was nymph, daughter of the celestial apsara 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 (Shakuntala 6-7).

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 thought that it was her mother who named her Shakuntala. She had the desire to know – why she was named Shakuntala but she never asked her mother, why? She thought that her mother was no nymph or apsara like the mother of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. She grew up in mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic.

She loved the woods and yet was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds. Her brother Govinda was a man of destiny, whose purpose was to restore order and true Dharma to the world. His tutor was an admirer of classical poetry and it was through his tutor that Shakuntala heard of Kalidasa, the great poet of Magadha. Shakuntala had the curiosity to know the story of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. His tutor told her the various virtues of Shakuntala and also that she fell in love with King Dushyanta when he came to hunt in the forest. Then he narrated how they got married secretly and Shakuntala lost the ring. He also gave her a book, the manuscript of Kalidasa’s Abhijana Shakuntalam. He also explained her why Kalidasa’s heroine was named Shakuntala. After hearing the story of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, she began to think:

What would happen if I were to share her fate, I wondered. Would Mother Nature be as kind to me (Shakuntala 24)?

After sometime Shakuntala was married to Srijan. Srijan knew her since she was a child. Shakuntala was his third wife. His other wives were dead and had not given him any children. Srijan was a mahasaamant, a rich man, the chief of fourteen villages. Srijan’s mother followed the path of Buddha. She had become a nun and shaved her hair before she died. The married life of Shakuntala was very decent and Srijan was very courteous to her. But she was not satisfied as
she always remembered the words of the Bhikkuni – ‘Arise, commence a new life.’ She felt envy for her mother-in-law and her hard-won freedom.

Namita Gokhale has presented Shakuntala as a very curious character who has keen desire to know more, see more and do more. Though Srijan had provided her all the comforts in home yet she did not feel satisfaction. She remarked:

I was hungry for experience. There were things I wanted to see, to know, to do. My ignorance irked me; I had, for example, never actually viewed an elephant. I had heard that the mrighastin, described as the beast with a hand, was the noblest and wisest of animals (Shakuntala 46).

Shakuntala had her own vision of freedom. She had 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 (Shakuntala 48).

Shakuntala was a learned woman who could argue with the scriptures in her mind. She thought of her mother-in-law – why did she renounce the home? What was the reason that she became a nun?

Srijan was anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre and so decided to perform Agnicayana ritual. At that time Shakuntala thought that she had not been successful in performing her duties as a wife. Although Srijan was too kind to show his disappointment at her infertility, the ritual reminded her of her inadequacies. Once when Srijan returned from his travels, he returned with a woman who was beautiful and looked like a crane in flight. 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, unsurper of her joys. She said:

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 (Shakuntala 58).

Though Srijan loved Shakuntala very much, yet she was constantly troubled by the questions – who was she? Why had Srijan brought her into our household? But she did not know what to do with her? She has no need of a Daasi! After sometime she felt some strange happenings, disturbing omens. She decided to have a talk with her friend the fisherman. But Shakuntala was not satisfied with his explanation. When she knew that Kamalini had a child, a handsome boy, she was filled with anger and fear. Her mind was haunted by the questions – Whose child was it? What was her relationship with my husband? Why had Kamalini left her son
behind? What is she doing in my home? All these questions tortured her mind. But alas! She could not get the answers of these questions. At that time she felt the world was a place of treason, not of trust. Sometimes she was haunted by wild fancies. She thought to be a monk or nun like Srijan’s mother. She said:

Perhaps I too could become a monk or a renunciate. Our religion had no place for women, but the Buddhist orders inducted women as novices. Like Srijan’s mother, I would sport a shaved head and wear ochre robes to live a life of penitence. I would walk and travel and see the world (Shakuntala 88).

But she rejected the whole idea to follow the course of Srijan’s mother because becoming a nun would be a defeat to Kamalini. She sought solace in the rhythm of cowsheds. Sometimes she used to walk through the forest to the abandoned temple because she did not want to see Kamalini.

Namita Gokhale had presented Shakuntala as a great scholar who had full knowledge of Dharma. As she said:

The Manava Dharma Shastra says: ‘A barren wife should be abandoned in the tenth year, one who bears only daughters in the twelfth, and one whose children all die in the fifteenth’ (Shakuntala 95).

Shakuntala did not allow herself to be disappointed. She consoled herself by thinking that Kamalini is only a Daas and her husband had no relation with her. When she came home with Srijan, she visited the village priest as she had seen something strange and requested him to interpret the omen. She took the help of that village priest to be happy and she told him – ‘It is a child I want. A child would change everything.’ Hearing this priest said, ‘You are but a child yourself.’ And began to hum something. He blessed Shakuntala and said:

‘I am worried about you, sister Shakuntala’, he said. ‘You wander about the woods at night, far from your hearth and home and respected husband. You while away your time with that foolish fisherman and forget the duties of a woman and a wife. The mahasamant Srijan is a mighty man, a wealthy man. Why is it you are not happy (Shakuntala 103)?

But Shakuntala could not answer these questions. She said that she wanted to see the world. Now Shakuntala thought that she had no need of the prayers of the village priest. She thought of Dasyu, the cow and her calf and hoped for a daughter. 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. When she had worshipped the river, she saw a man before her and she was enchanted by his smile. 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 (Shakuntala 110)
Shakuntala was leading a happy life now. She was pregnant and her husband loved her very much but she was so much fascinated towards the Yavana that she went to the temple of Gangadwar again and visited Nearchus the Yavana. The Yavana led her to his horse and on that shore she left Shakuntala and all her memories. When Nearchus asked her name, she replied ‘Yaduri’. Now she did not care for her husband or her home. She wanted to fulfill her desire to travel and so felt very happy now. She said:

I took to my changed circumstances with ease. I did not think of the house in the mountains. The young woman called Yaduri had no history. She lived in the ceaseless present. Only the river travelled with her, its murmur in her life-blood (Shakuntala 129).

Shakuntala travelled many cities – Kashi, Patliputra, Mathura, Magadha, Mithila etc. She enjoyed the Yavana’s way of love-making. Though sometimes he was rough and coarse, yet she was happy in the company of Yavana. She remarked:

I was greedy for these stories and tried to memorize the strange names he spoke and hold on to them as imagined pictures in my head. Nearchus told me of the ocean, where the rivers go when they leave the land. I could not picture it – water and more water as far as the eye can see… The world was a wild and wondrous place, and I was glad to be free and alone and travelling its surface with this Yavana who had seen and known so much (Shakuntala 134).

Nearchus brought Yaduri to his home. But after sometime she was fed up with this new life and saw Kalidasa’s Abhijnana Shakuntalam enacted, she remembered her past. Now she realized that she betrayed her husband. She remarked:

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 love-making 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 (Shakuntala 150).

Shakuntala compares her present with her past.

Her mind was totally troubled now with the questions – What am I doing here? Why did I come here? She felt that all this happened with her because her name is Shakuntala. Now she realizes that it is the nature of woman to have children and grandchildren and see them grow. She thought that because of her name she suffered all these difficulties. She remarks:

There is a child in my belly and I have fled from our home. What madness overcame me that day by the river? Perhaps that woman Kamalini, my dimly remembered rival,
had cast a spell upon me. Perhaps it was not her doing at all, for I was born under the star of exile, like my namesake Shakuntala (Shakuntala 166).

Now she does not want to live in the company of that Yavana. She felt that her desire to know more to see more, to experience more was no longer strong. She desired to go to the abandoned temple where she visited the goddess. She realizes:

One might travel for many nights and days but the place where one began was perhaps the only place where one belonged (Shakuntala 172).

Shakuntala came to Kashi and there she surrenders to a world of pleasure, travelling in the complete freedom from rules and bonds that she has always desired. Now she was all alone, no one’s wife or mistress or sister. She listened The Puranas from the mouth of a Brahmin. She saw different sights and great monks and worshippers there. At that time she remembers Bhikkuni’s words and planned to go to a monastery, a Buddhist Sangha and to follow the path of Srijan’s mother.

Namita Gokhale raised the question of the equality of woman with man. Shakuntala has the longing to travel like man, but she is helpless. She wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She keeps her opinions to herself because she knows that scriptures are forbidden to women. Through Shakuntala Namita Gokhale remarks:

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 (Shakuntala 48)?

Namita Gokhale is indebted to Buddha’s principles. She asserts the influence of Buddha upon Shakuntala. Although he renounced the world, he did not renounce the world of women, for his mercy extends to all creation.

Like the great saints and philosophers, Namita Gokhale asks:

What do we live for? Why do we die? To run away, always to run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river slake its waters (Shakuntala 3)?

She further asks:

Does the body rule the mind or mind the body (Shakuntala 158)?

She has an urge to know the purpose of life. Death is inevitable; all would leave this world and move on to the ones beyond. In Shakuntala she presents the conversation between Shakuntala and Kundan, the fisherman. Shakuntala asks:

I carried little faith in the village priest and his stories about the path of the soul after death, of the various levels of purgatory, of the pitralok and the heaven of Indra and so on. How, after all, could anybody who had not actually died know these things (Shakuntala 84)?
Namita Gokhale’s Shakuntala is thoughtful and ethical. She has firm faith in religion and Manava Shastras. When Shakuntala reaches Kashi, she listens a Vyasa, public reader of the sacred texts who was reciting tales from The Puranas to his audience.

In this book there is a certain simplification in the duality of choices that Namita Gokhale presents – brother-sister, tame Indian husband, wild Greek lover, and the garden of her heroine’s childhood against the turmoil of medieval Varanasi.

The book is mainly centered around Shakuntala who has her own vision of freedom. She is endowed with great courage and zeal. Since childhood she wants to know about Dharma and scriptures but she never told her opinions to her mother because the scriptures are forbidden to women. Her curiosity can be seen when she used to hear the religious texts narrated by the tutor of Guresvara. She used to discuss great philosophical facts with her brother but she never felt satisfied. Namita Gokhale, a feminist, presents Shakuntala as a great thinker and scholar. Shakuntala meditates:

My brother Guresvara had studied philosophy under an Advaita guru a follower of the Shankaracharya. He had interminable debates at the monasteries with learned Buddhists and other disbelievers about the true nature of the self. ‘What is the self?’ they would query self-importantly. Is it the body? Is it the mind? Is it the ego? I, Shakuntala, would have told them that it is none of these: the self is a seeding, a core, which observes, experiences, and persists even when everything else changes and passes (Shakuntala 48).

Though Shakuntala wants to travel and see new lands like the free birds and cloud yet thinks of the duty of a wife. There is a conflict in her mind as she considers Kamalini her rival and wants to defeat her. Sometimes she thinks to roam in the world because she is always haunted by the Bhikkuni’s words – ‘Arise! Commence a new life!’ But how can one do that? She compares herself with her brother and says:

Guresvara was a scholar and a mendicant, he could think and dream and roam the world with the abandon of a wandering cloud. He was like me, and yet my complete opposite. I was a woman; it was my lot to please my husband, to live at his pleasure. Guresvara was his own master. But, although he did not know it, a bit of me travelled with him wherever he went. As a flea travels on a dog, or pollen on a bee, so my mind travelled with my brother (Shakuntala 68).

Namita Gokhale has endowed Guresvara with great virtues of head and heart. He was always very kind and courteous to everyone and never found fault with anyone. He was not a critic and never mocked anyone because he felt that everything and everyone in this world is the reflection of God. Shakuntala has great respect for her brother and says:

He was noble beyond belief, as of course he could afford to be, with only god and himself to worry about, and they being the same in his philosophy. Sometimes I would get irritated by his goodness, his humility, his unremitting courtesy, for in an inexplicable way all these qualities added up to nothing but a great arrogance. He
believed only in what he called the ‘sword-edge of discrimination’ and he succeeded in making me feel selfish and stupid (Shakuntala 70).

Namita Gokhale creates characters with her imagination too. They possess beauty and are portrayed in an impressive way. The story moves around Shakuntala, Kamalini, Srijan, Nearchus, the old woman, Kundan and the fisherman.

Namita Gokhale regards Kashi a holy city. In Hindu mythology it is considered that to die in Kashi is to get Moksha. Namita Gokhale also remarks:

Kashi, the city of Shiva. The faithful arrived here in the hope of departure, for to die in Kashi was to escape the remorseless cycle of birth and death. Shiva, bending over the dead and the dying, whispered his mantra of deliverance into the ears of corpses. The Taraka mantra liberated them, ferried them across the river of oblivion to the far shores of Moksha (Shakuntala 137).

Namita Gokhale has great belief in rebirth. According to Hindu mythology, it is considered that all beings take rebirth because it is only body that dies and the soul enters the new body. The cycle of birth and rebirth goes on. She presents her views in this novel through the priest. Shakuntala recalls her earlier life. She felt that Shakuntala died in Kashi, by the banks of the sacred river but found no peak. She asked a priest – Why do these memories persist? The priest told her:

Our pasts live on. Each one of us carries the residue of unresolved karmas, the burden of debts we have to repay. Sister, you cannot run away. Confront this life. Only in acceptance will you find release (Shakuntala 4).

Having left the company of Nearchus, Shakuntala reaches Kashi and listens the sacred text of The Puranas:

Know then that, for the born, death is certain, and for the dead, rebirth. The supreme god Vishnu protects the universe. By his command, Brahma creates the world; by his order, Shiva destroys it, through Vishnu’s will all beings take rebirth, in various wombs, human and animal, good and evil, fit and unfit. Why, you might ask yourself, would Vishnu the lord of creation enter this ceaseless ocean of birth and rebirth? Age after age he becomes a tortoise, a boar, a lion, a dwarf. Why does he abandon the pleasures of Vaikuntha, forsake his heaven to dwell in a womb, hanging head downwards, trapped in a woman’s waste and urine, eating and drinking the same, tormented by worms, and scorched by the digestive fire (Shakuntala 183).

To sum up, in Shakuntala: The Play of Memory the novelist raises the question of the equality of woman with man as Shakuntala, the protagonist, has the longing to travel like man but she is helpless and wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She keeps mum about her opinions because she knows that scriptures are forbidden to women.
WORKS CITED