

*Re-Visiting Mythology: A Study of Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*  
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## **Re-Visiting Mythology: A Study of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory***

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### **Abstract**

*Revisiting mythology, takes place at three levels. It can be re-vision, re-imagining or re-interpretation. In re-vision, feminist revisionists convert the original author's intention by changing the perspective. They re-view the myths rooted in male perspective through the feminist lens and rewrite the tale from female perspective. The work is re-read with a view to expose the patriarchal or other unjust hierarchical practices and assumptions contained in them. Namita Gokhale uses the genre of fiction to show the cultural hegemony and a quest for liberty by revisiting mythology. Namita Gokhle's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is published in 2005, revisits Kalidasa's immortal play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. She presents her ideas of how women have experienced the injustice inflicted on them through the protagonist, *Shakunthala*. This women have been subjugated within their own families and by society at large. The result of the cultural hegemony leads the protagonist life to schism. The paper aims to show the revising of Kalidas's myth, and present it with the quest for liberty of a woman which ends in tragedy.*

**Key words:** *Revisionist mythmaking, feminist revisionist mythology, patriarchy, Cultural Hegemony, oppression, and Cultural Disintegration.*

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## Introduction

Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival.

-Adrienne Rich.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology is a contemporary genre that lays emphasis to subvert and transcend the focus of feminist literature. It engages mythology, fairy tales, religion, culture and recreate old fact to new ones. The novelist uses multiple methods to revisit mythology. It includes retelling the tale entirely from the perspective of female character, or recreating the story in a way that attempts to break down the treatment of women according to their times.

There are considerable number of contemporary Indian writers who use Revisionism or Revisionist Mythology in their works. The prominent revisionist works include Pratibha Ray's *Yagnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion*, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Utkarsh Patel's *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged*. The next in the line is Namita Gokhale's *Shakunthala: The Play of Memory*, and *In Search of Sita*.

Namita Gokhale is a popular Indian author known for her debut novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984). She has published sixteen works of fiction and non-fiction. Her other books include *A Himalayan Love Story*, *The Book of Shadows*, *Shakunthala: The Play of Memory*, *The Book of Shiva*, *In Search of Sita*, *The Edited Anthology Himalaya*, *Lost In Time*, *Ghatotkacha* and *The Game of Illusion*. She and co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival, and Director of Yatra Books, a publishing house specialised in translation. Many of Namita Gokhale's works are female oriented with a strong touch of feminism, self-identity and women empowerment. She presents a totally new concept of morality that leads to the fatal end of the protagonist. Gokhale strongly voices forth that a sudden attitude will only lead to cultural disintegration and irrevocable danger to the individual.

The novel, *Shakuntala: the play of memory* is based on the story of the famous mythological play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* written by Kalidasa. Namita Gokhale re-interpret the story of Kalidasa's *Shakunthala* and presents it from a female perspective. It reveals how much women are victimized by the age old cultural aspects. *Shakuntala* in Kalidasa's play is a helpless mythical character who is deserted by her husband King Dushyanta. She needs her mother Menaka, the celestial Apsara, to put things right for her. In contrast Gokhale's mortal *Shakuntala* is a very spirited

young woman, who attempts to be strongly reliant. She is bold enough to leave her home at a time when women are confined to their household. She questions the rules and customs of society, and when the opportunity arrives, she goes out to satisfy her adventurous spirit. Gokhale presents the tragedy of modern Shakuntala who dared to live life on her own terms. Her quest for identity leads unfortunately leads to the tragic end.

The protagonist of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is named after the fifth century dramatist Kalidasa's heroine Shakuntala. She herself differentiate her character from the mythological character

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 (5)

Each community has its own traits and model codes of conduct which are mainly imposed by the male hegemony. Indian culture has several set of ideas to define rules, regulations, beliefs, traditions, customs, and sacraments. The women who accepts these rules and regulations assigned to her is always accepted. However, if she breaks these images, she becomes an object of ridicule. The protagonist Shakuthala breaks all these rules and regulation and ventures into a new path but becomes a fallen woman and abandoned object at the end.

The novel portrays the life of Shakunthala, a young spirited, imaginative and freedom loving women. She is a carefree and very ambitious, eager and restless to see the world. However, Shakuntala's childhood is dominated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society. Her mother is a typical upholder cultural hegemony. She loves her son Govinda more than her daughter. She stresses Shakunthala to conform to the demand of chastity. According to her mother, a women life is meant only to be happy with feminine roles. So she insisted Shakunthala to be an ideal girl with all feminine qualities such as, an obedient daughter a faithful wife and a loving mother. Right from her childhood she suffers from the bias attitude of her mother.

Gokhale portrays the tradition of male dominated society, in which a son is given more importance than a daughter. Shakuntala's mother showers all her love upon her son Govinda. Govinda is provided with good food and education, a teacher is even appointed for his studies. But when Shakuntala asks her mother for her education, she is chided by her mother who says that the scriptures are forbidden to

women. On several occasions Shakuntala is dictated by her mother for being a female child. On reaching puberty when Shakuntala's menstruation starts, she is treated scornfully by her mother who is driven by orthodox beliefs and rituals. Restrictions are laid upon her during menstruation, especially from the view of rituals, she is considered impure, dirty and is not permitted to come out of her isolation, touch or even show her face to others, or touch cooked food during the period of her menstruation. She questions the idea of purity that are imposed on her in the name of religious beliefs and cultural values. She debates within herself the injustice laid upon women in the name of societal norms.

Shakunthala is forced to accept the gender bias and inequality in society. A son is always a matter of pride for the parents, whereas a girl is considered as a burden for them. When her mother compares Govinda as a reflection of some divinity. Shakunthala become furious. This attitude of the mother leads to sibling rivalry from her childhood. Shakunthala develops an unconscious hatred for her brother.

I dissolves into a jealous rage. Plucking all the marigolds in the garden. I stamped on them till they are interred in the damp earth. It was so like my brother, with his piety and noble ways, to intrude into my hard-earned happiness. (27)

Shakuntala's rage is symbolic of her rebellion against the child discrimination. Shakuntala feels burdened by the oppressive dominance of her mother who always insists on her conforming to the traditional way of life. The dislike for her mother's attitude that she has harbours within herself takes deeper roots until she looks for a way to escape from her mother. Shakuntala decides to free herself from the bondage of her mother. So she says, "I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation (18)". She is ready to break all those restrictions which are imposed on her by her mother and society. She finds marriage as the only alternative means to come out of the life of neglect and isolation.

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 contrary to this for Shakuntala looks at it as a way to rebel and release herself from the ill-treatment of her mother. Shakuntala's mother settles her marriage with Srijan, a widower and the chief of fourteen villages. She is his third wife, the earlier wives having died during childbirth. She readily accepts the opportunity thinking that it is the only way to revolt and free herself from the dictates of her mother. True enough for Shakunthala marriage provides a rare degree of freedom. Though she dislikes the role assigned to a wife who is expected to stay at home and take care of household duties. Yet, she feels it is the only way to

escape from her mother. She readily accepts the opportunity thinking that as the only way to revolt and free herself from the dictates of her mother.

Shakunthala prepares herself for marriage so that she can enjoy her life on her own terms. Unfortunately she finds that her marriage does not give her rights to fulfil all her desires. Shakuntala's aspired freedom and joy is however a false imagery and short lived. Although she does not have the restriction of her mother's house. She is expected to confine to the traditional and cultural boundaries. But the arrival of Kamalini is unexpected and is a severe blow on her. Srijan brings a beautiful tribal woman, Kamalini from one of his foreign journeys saying "Shakuntala, don't ask me any questions. She has been brought here as your handmaid and that's all"(58). The beauty of Kamalini makes Shakuntala jealous and insecure of her authority and position in Srijan's life and in her house. Shakuntala feels betrayed and frustrated by Kamalini's presence in the house and 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)

Her confidence shattered and feeling insecure of Srijan's love and interest. Shakuntala craves for his attention and love. Unlike Kalidasa's Shakunthala who goes to Dushyant pleading him to take her back. Gokhale's Shakunthala decides to accept the consequences, and keeps her pride intact.

The tainted relationship with her husband again create a Shakunthala is suspicious of relationship between her husband and Kamalini. This created a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala, who decides to leave her husband's house. The proverb goes, 'Every child has a silver lining,' and life does bless Shakunthala with a small rag of hope. She is blessed with a child, the long cherished dream of her husband Srinjan. She is advised to visit the holy temple to pray for a safe child birth. At the temple Shakuntala meets a Greek traveller, Nearchus. Her quest for exploration and knowledge is again allured into a desire to explore and venture into unknown. She elopes with him to live and travel to her heart's content.

She throws her 'silver anklets' which is symbol of bondage and domesticity. By doing she breaks off from the traditional norms of her culture and society. She leaves behind her childhood identity and emerges as a new being and calls himself Yaduri. She starts to enjoy the freedom and independence that she has bestowed on herself. Shakuntla is aware of the fact that Nearchus is a Yavana, a foreigner who is considered impure and unclean. His presence is considered to be a polluting influence

on the high castes but still she dares to run away with him. She does not even hesitate to involve in sexual relationship with Nearchus. Shakuntala rebels not only against the patriarchal norms and constraints but also against social and religious codes and dogmas. Gokhale uses 'silver anklets' as a symbol of bondage and domesticity. On the other hand Kalidasa uses 'ring' as a symbol of memory to bond the family together. When she is confined to 'Shakunthala' she carry away the instructions of culture. But as soon as she takes up the new identity of 'Yaduri' she feels she is liberated from all the clutches of societal norm.

To travel to distant lands and experience an entirely different kind of love. Taking off my silver anklets, I flung them into the water and ran towards him. On that pebbled shore I left Shakunthala and all her memories. I named myself 'Yaduri'. (115)

However, Shakuntala's newly sprung life of liberty and adventure is short lived. Her quest for identity, experience and knowledge is once again cropped when Nearchus proposed to marry her. Shakunthala who once looked upon marriage as a way to freedom now declares it as it would again confine her within the cultural norms. Now she does not want to live in the company of that Yavana and she decides to leave him. She feels that her desire to know more to see more, to experience more is no longer strong. She recalls her days at home and regrets her decision. To quote;

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 (166).

Wandering on the streets of Kashi, she recalls her past and reflects on her life as Shakunthala – whose life now just a play of memory. Now she realizes that it is the nature of woman to have children and grandchildren and see them grow. She realises that a journey towards liberty and dilemma. But her realisation that the path she has chosen is not the answer to her quest, fails to help her set right in life. Her novel concludes with her tragic end on the road of Kashhi in the midst of a labyrinth of a messed up her life. Attacked by a charging bull and with a wounded womb, she now realizes her mistake.

Shakunthala is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practice. She does not allow her dreams and desires to be crushed under the heels of cultural hegemony and undertakes a journey to fulfil her desires and aspirations. She does not want to walk the path of subjugation laid before her by society. She rather chooses to create a new path for herself, of her own choice irrespective of the norms, tradition

and society where upon she progresses with full confidence and strength. She walks out of her home in protest against her suffering, but gradually realizes that walking out of situation does not solve her problems.

She faces reality with a sense of remorse. With a child in her womb, her body ribbed 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 angry she broods over the past and recalls it with a sense of remorse.

I thought, unaccountably of Srijan, where he must be and what he would be doing. I tried to think of Nearchus as well . . . Both of these men seemed like shadows, I could not believe that they had existed, that my life had once been a part of theirs. Now I was alone, no one's wife or mistress, nor sister. (181)

Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* is portrayed as an epitome of Indian womanhood. She is represented as meek, submissive and subordinate woman. While Namita Gokhale's *Shakunthala* is portrayed as a free spirited and rebellious woman who transcends all barriers to live her life as her own wish. Unlike Kalidasa's *Shakunthala*, Gokhale have given the clear picture of desire of woman and made her protagonist more adventurous in the choice of her life. By revisiting the myth of Kalidasa, Gokhale jaxaposts the importance of liberty of women and their quest for knowledge and also shows the consequence of breaking the culture norms. Women are allowed to enjoy their freedom but at the same time they must be bounded within the society and culture.

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