



A QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF NAMITA GOKHALE

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ABSTRACT

Quest for identity refers to the existential struggle of a man in order to attain meaning and value in his life. It is an inward journey for existence, a search for roots and a struggle for self-expression. The loss of identity makes a person very pathetic. As a result, his voice becomes an alto in a chorus. Much writing has been done about the search of identity in the post - colonial literature. The quest for identity has now become the central theme of contemporary women's fiction. Most of the Indian women novelists have also focused on women issues, they have a women's perspectives on the world. The quest for self-identity forms the underlying theme of most of the Indian English novelists.

INTRODUCTION

Namita Gokhale is one of the most prolific literary personalities in the fictional world of Indian English Writing. She recently won the Sahitya Akademi Award 2021 for her outstanding novel "Things To Leave Behind". Her work mostly deals with the human psychology and mainly focuses on how male and female psychology works. She rebels against traditional fiction with respect to subject matter. Feminism is the dominant theme in her writing. She openly writes about the exploitation and discrimination of women living in the Indian society.

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Germaine Greer's "The Female Eunuch" made a deep impact on Namita Gokhale as it was a very different worldview from anything she had felt before. Germaine Greer's major works greatly influenced her understanding of women writers. She studied Indian religion in terms of 'devi puja' and 'shakt' philosophy which was most important and experimental part of her 'feminist criticism'.

Namita Gokhale has tremendous passion for writing so, she decided writing as her career. She has original and unflagging ability to write. She herself pointed about her writing as –

"The best writing comes when you really can't control it. Even if you don't want to write, you feel compelled to write. In that moment, mission or goal becomes irrelevant; there is just an irresistible urge to articulate your own confusions; your own doubts. I have experienced that urge." (qtd. in Bramhavati)

As a feminist, Namita Gokhale critically observed the life of the people around her. Namita Gokhale is the author of a well-known work like "Paro: Dreams of Passion" in which she talks of love, lust and death in equal measure. Her personal experiences have shaped her works. Her eventful life has provided her with a vast canvas for her work. Gokhale's other books such as "A Himalayan Love Story" (2002); "Gods, Graves, and Grandmother" (2001), "The Book of Shadows" (1999), and "Priya: In Incredible Indyya" (2011) also have strong female characters that deal with love, lust, death, and often the supernatural.

Gokhale is a journalist in Delhi whose work focuses on women's issues and literary criticism. Her first book "Paro: Dreams of Passion" published in 1984; exhibited the stark reality of the contemporary society. Woman with strong emotions and desires appears in one after the other novel in the novels of Namita Gokhale. She has not just simply portrayed the female characters but also pictured the way they were trying to create their identity.

Namita Gokhale depicts the Indian woman's search for identity in a society still dominated by tradition, which tends to treat a woman as a subordinate to her lord and protector-be it the father, brother, husband or son. Gokhale in her novels brings up critical issues like; what does woman get from the public. Gokhale delineates the desolation, anguish and strife of Indian women got between male centric society and custom from one perspective and distinction, self-articulation and freedom on the other. Namita Gokhale has effectively anticipated the urges, dreams and wants of Indian Women, specifically the white-collar class housewife who will not be limited and choked by her environment. She shows profound understanding into human instinct and topics of conflict among innovation and custom.



This Sahitya Akademi Award winning writer came into light when Indian society is filled with sexual frankness, whether it is in books or in films. Namita Gokhale's novels have a wide range of themes, intensity of emotions and speech and of course aims at the equality of the sexes. The novels of Namita Gokhale mainly explore the theme of searching for self-identity. The readers can easily recognise the reflections of author's own self in her novels. The characters in the novels of Namita Gokhale struggles against the traditional values of Indian society and are extremely ambitious. The feminist demeanor of these women characters is apparent in the proclamation of their feminine urges. What imposes them with the pain is the sexualization and objectification by men.

Gokhale's first novel "*Paro: Dreams of Passion*" (1984) is the best example of quest for self-identity, especially concerning the characters of Paro and Priya. The novel presents an intense search of a woman for her true-self in the Indian society. The novel is mainly focused on Paro who has a defiant attitude. She has her own thoughts of freedom. She is always indulged in sexual pleasure with the rich people in the society. She enjoys with them one after another, lived a lustful life but finally in search of her identity she met with a tragic end, though she has satisfied her material needs by the use of money but her emotional need remains unsatisfied. With the help of the character of Paro, Namita Gokhale has pointed out the concept of femininity, which aimed at woman to be compliant, humble, modest, and sacred also. In this novel Namita Gokhale discusses love, desire and demise in equivalent measure. Namita Gokhale has given a loud and clear voice to the ongoing saga of exploitation and abuse of woman. Through her fictional work she has brought foreword the story of suffering and pain that engulfs any woman who dares to transgress the predetermined codes of conduct and behaviour of society.

In her another novel "*Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*" (2005) the protagonist Shakuntala is a victim of gender discrimination and she also has a quest for self-identity. Shakuntala was always ignored by her mother as she gives more importance to her son. Shakuntala always desires for learning the scriptures but she didn't get it so she gathered knowledge by talking and wondering in the mountainous regions of India. Shakuntala's husband betrayed her but her quest for identity, knowledge and freedom result in her secret elopement with a Greek horse merchant. Here Shakuntala is shown to have done rebel against the Indian tradition that a married woman is expected to be loyal and faithful to her husband till her death. But Shakuntala in her quest for identity and freedom breaks the traditional norms. Here Namita Gokhale wants to show that if a woman desires, then she can choose her own path and can fulfil all of them.

Namita Gokhale kept women as the protagonists in all her novels. Similar is the case with her another outstanding novel "*God, Graves and Grandmother*" (1994), we find all the characters are trying to search for their self-identity. In this novel grandmother is a woman of



ability and an overcome woman. She doesn't afraid at all to the troublesome conditions, however with her granddaughter-Gudiya, she sings bhajans in a melodious voice and she attracts a huge gathering of people. She turns into a living holy person. This way the grandmother made a living for herself- with her skill and capacity to move things as according to her advantage. This shows that grandmother had found her identity through her singing ability. Similarly, Gudiya's quest for identity is an unending process. When she is separated from her husband, she learns, not only to broaden her experiences, but also to protest effectively.

Gokhale's most famous novel "*Priya: In Incredible Indyya*" (2011) deals with the struggling nature of women. This novel is a sequel to Paro's Liberal legacy in the novel "Paro: Dreams of Passion". The protagonist Priya is completely aware that she could never be Paro. The novel reflects a very rich and high profile elite society in the ceremonies and the parties. Characters like Poonam stand for the New Women, glamorous and seductive with modern thinking. She encourages women to be bold and courageous enough to face any challenge. She wants women to be a dutiful wife, loving mother, responsible women and lead life as they want. This evaluates the fictional ability of Namita Gokhale because she has realized and unfolded the inner selves and feelings of her female characters with masterly strokes.

"*A Himalayan Love Story*" (2002) by Namita Gokhale has unfulfilled love as its dominant theme. This theme further helps to deconstruct the sexual limitations of a woman, which helps her in her quest for identity. Namita Gokhale in this novel, deals with the above theme presented in such a way that the familiar seems unfamiliar and we see it through a different lens, with a new perspective. She presents the classic theme of unrequited love into pursuit of emancipation for Parvati, the protagonist of the novel. Oppression of sexual desire often leads to mental illness. In this novel, not only Parvati suffers from mental trauma but also a whole generation of females before her suffers. This mental illness is symbolic of subjection of women. The novel is an account of women's persistence, fortitude and victorious spirit against all odds. The importance of the novel lies in the celebration of sexuality on one hand and rebellion against it on the other.

Protagonists in Gokhale's novels are one of its variety and strange beings who respond creatively and strongly to the challenges of life and their own urges and emotions. In order to create their identity in patriarchal Indian culture, the female protagonists of Namita Gokhale try to rebel against the male dominance by achieving economic independence. In her work, we find women indulging in extra marital affairs for achieving their self-identity. We can also see that the women who are choked and arrested by traditions may reject it by leaving the house of their husband.



Namita Gokhale's characters belong to upper middle-class, middle-class, metropolitan slums and even ancient traditional class. And most important thing is women in her novels assert themselves. Women characters in her novels have the strong hunger for life and the ability to fight the worst conditions and the world boldly. Gokhale tried to explain that a woman also has a rightful place in the patriarchal society. She expects a woman to be self-reliable and always live with a self-respect.

Namita Gokhale's novels explore her vast experiences that she had countered throughout her life. She aptly depicts the tensions, complexities, joys and sorrows of her female protagonists. She writes only to secure the sense of self-identification. The female characters undergo moments of unbearable mental torture and for them, marriages are nothing but a conflict, frustration, and a long period of stress. Marital incompatibility is a serious problem which is found in all the novels of Namita Gokhale. Without being aware of the basic psychological and temperamental difference between man and woman, husbands and wives fight against each other and the gap between them widens to such an extent that makes the reunion either impossible or difficult. Because of this anguish and stress women lead themselves towards exploration of self-identity.

Namita Gokhale's novels are basically psychological in tone. She is psychologically concerned with the tragic life of all her characters who desperately commit suicide or attempt suicide by inhuman impositions upon them. She has applied deconstruction theory in all her novels. All her protagonists are the reflection of deconstructed femininity. She deals with the psychological struggles of the female characters who are desperate to find their self-identity in her fiction.

Namita Gokhale in her novels attempts to bring out the quest for self-identity of every female character. The reason behind their loss of identity is the betrayal from their close ones, rootlessness or some unforgettable childhood trauma. In the process of quest for self-identity, sometimes they choose wrong paths. But at one point, though they are successful in their life, they regret for their mistakes. And though some characters die at the end, they get salvation since they realise their mistakes.

CONCLUSION

Namita Gokhale wants to show that sex is the secondary need for a woman but her principal concern or need is being an identity. Her novels reveal her keen concern for the welfare of women. Gokhale splendidly points out the quest of female identity in all her novels. The study of women protagonists in the novels of Namita Gokhale will surely guide Indian women to search for their self-identity.



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