



THE USE OF MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S *SHAKUNTALA: THE PLAY OF MEMORY*

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Received: 17/01/2018

Edited: 29/01/2018

Accepted: 12/02/2018

Abstract: *It is the greatest task before novelist has been to find an adequate mode to convey the incommunicable. In their search for, to select T.S. Eliot's phrase, an "objective correlative" to emotions, feelings and thoughts, the novelists have found myth as a very effective mode. In these traditional representations of the exploits of religious, regional, cultural and national characters both mortal and immortal the novelists have found a reference point, an archetype a parallel or even a contrast to be employed for conveying what they want to say. Indian novelists inherited myth and cultivated it in every form of literature as Indian mythology proved to be a generous background. Indian writings are enriched with stories and themes drawn from Vedas, Upanishada, Purana, Geeta, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Buddhist Scriptures. The concept of Hindu culture is founded by many myths and folklores such as Vedic shloka, epics, purana and regional tales.*

Author of Shakuntala: The Play of Memory, Namita Gokhale, one of the eminent novelists also uses myth and Indian history to express her views about the fatal fate of a woman, who also suffuses in the illustrative dreams about her past life. She beautifully enter woven a tragic love story of a village girl named Shakuntala who is caught in the clutches of the circular journey of life and death. This novel has been hinted in the review of the book as "A hauntingly beautiful book" for the readers in Indian society. Gokhale binds a tragic love story of a woman to the religious manner with a single thread. The plot is borrowed from the famous play Abhijajna Shakuntalam written by Kalidasa. The novel deals with a story of a young woman who aware through a blind priest about the mystery of her former life. To which she promptly turns suffering at last and fell in tragic love in her life. Shakuntala the heroine is a jealous woman about the identity, her husband, Shakuntala assumes the Individual Identity of Yaduri, the trodden and fallen woman, she deserts home and meets a Greek traveler regularly, and they reach to Kashi. She fully consumes the time from the customs and rude rules of the society, but soon she turned into frustrated and restless one.

Key Words: *Mythology, Folklore, Re-birth, Viswvasu, Agnicayana.*

Through the fact and fiction to a creative writer is only authentic field of her creativity for its both imagination and perception. It is the greatest task before novelists has been to find an adequate mode to convey the incommunicable subjects. History and myth are the great source of material in fiction writing. In India there is not huge historical tradition while myth has been ranked as the strongest instrument to preserve own tradition and culture. To convey the meaning and importance of illustrated subject and work, biblical tales and Greek myth are used in every genre of English literature. Myth is a narrative about supernatural beings to express beliefs of a particular cultural region. We find the novels written in the modern age, William Golding and James Joyce are torch bearers who employed myth

and folklore extensively in their novels. We can say that the use of myth folklore have Indian own heritage. Indian novelist inherited myth and cultivated it in every genre of writings as Indian mythology proved to be a cultural and generous background. Indian writings in English are enriched with regional tales and themes extracted *Vedas, Upanishada, Purana, Ramayan, Geeta, Mahabharata and Buddhist scriptures*. Expressing the view about folklore Devdutt Pattanaik defines myth that it reminds us of their common hold with the people and culture:

Myth is essentially a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular.
(101)

Namita Gokhale is one of the leading Indian English novelists. She wrote seven novels as well as two books of short stories and five books of non-fiction, all are mentioned as remarkable creation of her mind and art. *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the proof of its title was published in 2005 is an intriguing in interplay of myth and history. This novel is firstly published in Hindi edition then after in English. Its plot has not only borrowed but also much influenced with the famous ancient Sanskrit play *Abhijanana Shakuntalam* written by a well known poet and dramatist Kalidasa in the fourth century. Gokhale uses Indian myth to develop her thoughts about feminism. She seems to be fond of representing Kalidasa's Shakuntala, who lost her ring the only evidence of her Gandharva marriage with Dushyanta in the modern perspective. The background, narrative technique and settings are also takes us into the world of belief and religion. Neeta. Gupta remarks this novel:

She (Namita Gokhale) has successfully inter-woven religion, social history and timeless tale to produce a novel that stands out for its rich narrative text nonstop it is undoubtedly one of her best works so far. (56-57)

The novel deals with the tragic love story of a beautiful village girl named Shakuntala, who recalled her past life as she had lived in this place in past. Like Plato and William Wordsworth, Gokhale too believed in the philosophy of 'immortality of the soul', its previous life and re-birth. According to the hindu mythology it is considered about immortality of soul and mythology about re-birth. Gokhale's protagonist Shakuntala suffused with profound metaphysical assumption about herself, she begins to think of god, religion, pain and suffering during the cycle of life and death. She asks the very significant questions to a blind priest who informs Shakuntala about her previous birth and its owed bear of Karma. The priest and his ancestors have been registering the details of visitors for many years at the Ganga bank in the city of Shiva:

What is death? Why do we 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? (4)

Shakuntala was a thoughtful girl since childhood days. She also sits beside his brother and learns lesson from his teacher. After listening about meaning her name and the theme of *Shakuntalam* from Gureshwar's teacher and asserts herself as the past shakuntala of Kalidasa:

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 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. (6)

Modern Shakuntala has a capacity to create storm, she is always loveable, beautiful, caring but controversial girl. Her beauty should be honoured and revered. She is empathetic, generous and kind always worthy of praise and appreciation. She has provided proof of her patience, tolerance and strength at every phase of life. Sometime she enjoys the sense of relief and freedom at times experiences the emotions of jealous, anger and revenge. Shakuntala is a daughter of a vaidya and her mother had learned a little, how to prepare medicine for healing from him. At the age of five her father died. She had an elder brother named Gureshwar. An astrologer predicted that her brother would be a great sage. As a single male of the family, Gureshwar was looked after by his mother, she also paid attention on his studies and opportunity. This is the seed of jealous which was sawn in the mind of discriminated Shakuntala. When Shakuntala caught in the clutches of woman's menses, she did not

understand about these changes but eager to aware these sudden changes in her body. When her mother comes to know about it, she twisted her ear sharply yanked her out of the kitchen and abuses with these words:

Have you no modesty, girl! She hissed. Defiling the house hold fires when a holy man is visiting us! You are a woman now; you had better understand what that implies! (31)

Shakuntala had an earnest desire to see elephant since her childhood due to rare visiting of the big animal in her village situated in the east mountain. Shakuntala lost an opportunity to see an elephant who ventured up in her village. By the dint of her ritu cycle and impurity she could not see the elephant. She renamed the ritu cycle as curse for women's world and realizes:

an elephant had ventured up the steep mountain paths that led to our village,.....
...But that very night I was visited by the ritu, the monthly curse of women, and for the next four days I was relegated to the inner room. (46)

Namita Gokhale also uses myth of Indra's curse and dreadful punishment like Girish Karnad in *Fire and the Rain*. The villagers had admitted that every human should have paid worship to their gods for their survival and better future otherwise their god would be unhappy and consequently punish them with their supernatural strength. In summer season the fire in the forest spreads in a destructive manner. Shakuntala's mother fearfully says about the wrath of Agnidev:

It was a strange year. In the summer there were forest fires, flares of spiteful flame enveloping the green forests where I was accustomed to roam. 'The god Agni is showing his wrath,' mother said fearfully. The villagers have forgotten to propitiate him, they have abandoned the fire-sacrifice, the old ways.(20)

Another myth about the personification of animals, they act like human. As we find in some ancient tales

such as their relationship with human being and their living ways like as man and woman. In the novel Gokhale uses myth about bear an animal that catches girls and marriages with them:

Mother forbade me to leave the house by night or day, for bears were known to carry away young girls and take them as their wives. (22)

During the absence of Gureshwar, Shakuntala's mother does not scold her even tells a story to console her anguish behavior. The myth of Rakshasa is used by the novelist to adjoin her story in narrative technique. The story of a Raakshas named Uravasura, who lived in a cave and eats a virgin living in the nearest village in spring season every year:

Uncharacteristically, Mother didn't scold me for the ruination I had caused. Instead, she consoled me with a story her grandmother had told her in those long-ago times in the northern mountains. It was about a demon, a rakshasa named Uruvasura, who lived in a deep cave in the rock face. Every year, as the zephyrs of Vasant announced the spring, this monstrous creature would devour a virgin from the nearby village. (28)

Shakuntala's mother locked her in gaushala and warned not to move anywhere from this place. She is disappointed and discriminated; however, she makes herself free and goes out from her house. She reaches in the dense forest and found herself alone and suffered one afraid of wild animals and demons. She manages her fear with her whistle. On the way she met a demon who often appears in folklores fairy tales. She keenly observes demoness' appearance and follows her orders to go along with her towards a cave such as she would have enchanted by the demoness as in the text of ancient Indian writings.

I whistled to myself now, a happy, cheerful tune that gave me courage and indicated to anyone who might hear that I was not afraid. Long into my trek, I saw a circle of fire floating towards me. Slinking even further to the side of the path, I huddled

..... and I saw an unusually tall woman, naked but for a piece of coarse cloth around her waist, bend down and squat before me. She was slim and sinewy; her dark skin shone dully in the blue light of the moon. Removing the fire basket from her head, she placed it on the ground. (33)

Another use of myth about a gandharva Visvavasu who is known for his temper to claim newly married woman of well born men. A traditional ritual is performed in the occasion of marriage. The other members of the family makes a rod of wood which is symbolized as the Gandharva, it would not be crossed by a new couple during their first three nights. This rod may help the couple to have patience in the begining of their conjugal life:

This is the rod of Visvavasu, the lusty Gandharva who claims the wives of well-born men.....suffered Visvavasu in our lives. For three nights as the moon waxed we observed the vow of continence with which a true marriage must begin. (39)

Myth of Arundhati is also known as a significant star, her husband Srijan indicates above the sky and shows Arundhati which would help Shakuntala to become thoughtful. Hence she, as a thoughtful girl since her childhood tells him a lie that she could not see the star ever the star was twinkling there:

It was merely a ritual, and my husband never believed overmuch in ceremony. Yet the sight of the Arundhati star made me thoughtful, even apprehensive. I cannot see the star, I lied, 'and besides, my head is hurting.'(42)

In Hindu mythology an own son is only being who provides light their funeral pyres in the last ritual ceremony of their parents in the cremation ground. Shakuntala is the third wife of Srijan. His other wives had died and had not left any issue for his heir so Srijan is very eager to have his own child. He agrees to perform a ritual ceremony called Agnicayan to pray god and goddess with providing them Sura and dishes through the fire of hawan as well as slaughtering of goats:

During his travels to the east, Srijan had met a soothsayer who urged him to perform the Agnicayana ritual so that the new woman of his house might bear sons. Anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre, my husband decided to initiate the prayer..... priests from distant Kashi, inviting them to our mountain home to conduct the Agnicayana.(49)

The importance of the directions is very significant concept which is used in most of books based upon Indian mythology. During the Agnicayana ritual the head of priests prepared the worshiping place on a small hill to arrange sitting place for their gods. Every direction is declared for different gods for prosperity, health, plenty and eternal peace. Shakuntala participates the Agnicayana ritual in anxious mood and says:

I observed them establish the four directions: north for the god of wealth, south for the god of death, east and west for prosperity and plenty. As they set about calculating the four quarter-directions. (51)

Myth about slaughtering in Hindu mythology is used by Namita Gokhale in this novel .People who have earnest desires to get something related to their lives in this world, find themselves having effortless try to pray their god and goddess with no limitations even they attempt such deeds like murder of innocent living creatures. In the end of the ritual the head of the priests orders to a local priest as the lowest in the hierarchy to slaughter seven goats:

The village priest, the lowest in the hierarchy, was assigned the task of slaughtering the goats. He did this swiftly, without remorse. The sandy soil was stained with blood. The smell and sight of it sickened me. (53)

Myth about the sun as the lord of power is concerned with the expression of the beautiful surroundings at the time of half-dawn in the forest of mountain. Here Shakuntala befalls in the calamity which is brought by her husband. He comes along with a woman from the east region; Srijan brings

another lady named Kamalnini the grab of a maiden for assisting her. Shakuntala understands in a moment about Srijan's purpose of her arrival and stay in her house. Shakuntala seems in depression and moves out again from her house. She goes to the old left temple where she often used to spend her time of loneliness while Srijan went in his travelling. She meets again a mysterious event with her and spends all night in a cave as Garvagrah under the temple. She wakes up in dawn and watches the Ashwin star while waiting Marut, the lord of wind and the sun, lord of power. She says that Usha is the daughter of the sun who appears with his chariot of seven horses from the heaven:

It was still the time of the half-dawn, when the Ushas, the daughters of heaven, first light the sky. I waited until the Ashvins and the Maruts and the seven horses of the Sun-god began the march of the day. Only when I could feel the golden rays of the Sun on my skin did I venture back home. (61)

One day while wandering in the shore, Shakuntala meets a young man whose looks are very carefree and joyous. She knows instinctively that he has travelled for long and through many countries to be there. He smiles at her and she is enchanted. She is highly attracted with his behavior and she starts thinking that her life has changed. She feels that she would not go back to where she had come from. His name is Nearchus. He is from the land of Yavanas. When he asks about of Shakuntala, she replies that

she is "Yaduri." It is a turning point in the life of Shakuntala. Now her identity as Shakuntala is lost and she has become Yaduri, a trodden and fallen woman. She thinks that her thirst for traveling would be satisfied by Nearchus. Thus, as she seems hungry for experience and leaves home and family for the company of a Greek horse merchant.

Shakuntala entices and surrenders herself to fulfill her desires of pleasure and knowledge. She starts living with the Yavana and she surrenders herself to the new life. In the company of the Yavana she realizes that the world is wild and wondrous place. She is happy to be free and alone and she enjoys life and flying like a bird. Sometimes she used to feel home sickness on the bank of the Ganga, she feels an intense sense of home coming. But now the way to go back has ceased. It is because of her knowledge that now the society would not accept her once again in the same role as she was in the past. The coyness of her is no more in her now. The Telegraph has also remarked about the novel as:

Original and heart-rending, Shakuntala enthralls in its vivid portrayal of the tragic life of a woman whose desire to live on her own terms is thwarted at every turn by circumstances and the age in which she lives. Namita Gokhale combines her extraordinary gift for story telling with history, religion and philosophy to craft a timeless tale that transcends its ancient settings.

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