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## **'Samskara of Abandonment' Is No More A Curse: A Study of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory***

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### **Abstract:**

The present article is an analytical study of Namita Gokhale's novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. Whole history of women has been a painful saga of their sufferings and their abandonment by society if they ever try to assert their identity. In the present novel, Namita Gokhale has not only dealt with all those sufferings but also has come out with a different interpretation to the lot of women because of their abandonment. She has re-interpreted women's cursed lot of abandonment as an opportunity to assert their individuality.

**Keywords: Abandonment, Culture, Sacraments, Samskaras, self.**

Human beings are social animals. They live in social units and follow their customs and traditions. There is a cultural sharing of thoughts, beliefs and ideologies among them. Every culture has some particular traits and model codes of conduct. Similarly, in Hinduism there are several sets of ideas to define its rules and regulations, belief system, traditions, customs and sacraments etc. Particular feature of Hinduism is its sacraments called *Samskaras*. There is a significant relationship between these samskaras and culture. Since birth till death, a human being, particularly in India, is confined to various types of Samskaras which grant them decorum and dignity.

*The Dictionary of Common Sanskrit Spiritual Words* defines *Sanskara* (Samskara) as:

Whenever an action is performed with the desire for a specific (whether for one self or another) samskara is created for that person. These accumulate and determine the situations with which we will be presented in future and will influence the scope of future actions.

In Hinduism, there are mainly Sixteen Samskaras ranging from conception of a child to the funeral ceremonies. These samskaras are transmitted from generation to generations. Moreover it is believed that samskaras of previous lives remain stick to the soul in upcoming lives. Dr. Satyaprasad Dasji states that “. . . human soul is eternal and these samskaras are inseparably attached with the soul. Wherever this human soul would go, these samskaras would remain attached with him” (10).

Right from the very first *samskara of Garbhadhan* (sacrament of impregnation) to the last *samskara of Antyesthi* (sacrament of funeral), male has been given the pivotal role and

significance. It is he whose birth, life and death is desired, celebrated and mourned. Woman has remained subsidiary or neglected in customs and sacramental rituals. Sri V.A.K. Ayer in his study of Hinduism quotes *The Laws of Manu IX, 18* which states that “For women no sacramental rite is performed with sacred texts, thus the law is settled.” According to feminist criticism all these samskaras play a decisive role in making male a subject and woman as an object. M.A.R. Habib observes:

Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, woman has remained imprisoned within the circles of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive function. (682)

The only samskara in woman’s lot has been the ‘*Samskara of abandonment*’. The woman who accepts the stereotypical rules and regulations and confines herself to the traditional images assigned to her, is considered as an angel, a Devi. However, if she tries to transcend these images, she becomes a fallen Angel, she becomes an abandoned object.

Namita Gokhale’s novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* has its roots deeply down in these beliefs of Hinduism. However her treatment and analysis of these samskaras and ideologies is altogether critical and thought provoking. She is one of the most prominent Indian English Feminist writers today. She has authored six novels, a collection of short stories and several other non-fictional works. Her interest and belief in mythical studies is well known in the literary world. She has recently edited, in collaboration with Malashri Lal, an anthology *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*. She has been taking great pains in re-interpreting the myths and their impacts on the lives of Indian women.

In her masterpiece *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Namita Gokhale has portrayed the life of a woman who confronts memories of her previous life. In these memories she finds her Shakuntala, a spirited, imaginative and freedom loving woman. However, in that life she is destined, like her legendary namesake Shakuntala of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, to suffer the samskara of abandonment.

Shakuntala of Namita’s novel confronts with this samskara right from her childhood. She says:

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa’s classic drama . . . That Shakuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her father Vishwamitra and later by her husband Dushyanta—one could say that she carried within herself the samskara of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name. (Gokhale 6-7)

She is passionate, lively and enthusiastic to see the world “with the freedom of birds and clouds” (Gokhale 9). She finds no fault with disorder as she sees it as the natural condition of life. However, she is nurtured to be a disciplined woman. Her mother stresses her to conform to the demand of chastity, “Never forgot, the vessel of your virtue is like the urn of water you balance

on your head,' she would say. You must not spill even a drop as you carry it home!" (Gokhale 40).

Right from her childhood she has suffered because of the typical *samskara* of abandonment. Her mother focuses all her attention on her son, Guresvara (Shakuntala's brother). She remains almost abandoned by her mother. When Shakuntala has her first menstrual blood flow, she is "abandoned" to "bleed to death" lest she defile the purity of the home (Gokhale 31). Later she is married to Srijan, a mahasamant whose earlier two wives are dead. He also tried to show her "the star of Arundhati . . . the emblem of fidelity" (Gokhale 42).

Another determining factor of the *samskara* of abandonment is the glorification of motherhood. To reproduce has been considered as the sole role of a woman. Since times immemorial she has been treated as a breeding machine. Shakuntala becomes the spokes person of Namita Gokhale when she contemplates about the Manava Dharma Shastra which states that "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" (Gokhale 95).

Shakuntala's married life also gets muddled when for years she finds herself unable to conceive. Although she is never tortured or tormented by her husband for this but she remains conscious that her husband is anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre. Situation becomes worst when her husband "brought back a woman with him" returning from his journey (Gokhale 57). She feels a severe feeling of being abandoned by her husband.

Namita Gokhale has delved deep in the psychology Shakuntala's character. In Shakuntala we meet a woman who has always seen herself aloof from her life. Her conditioning always demands from her confinement in the four walls of her household. But she has a strong urge to come out of the threshold. She confesses that "I was hungry for experience. There were things I wanted to see, to know, to do. My ignorance irked me" (Gokhale 46).

It is from here that Shakuntala, unlike her namesake, denies to remain confined in the stereotypical role. She decides to come out to explore the world of her desires. In Biblical myth, Eve was tempted to eat the fruit of knowledge and this to disobey God and as a consequence she became a fallen Angel. Shakuntala too steps out to taste the fruit of knowledge. Having the *samskara* of abandonment in her, this time it is she who abandons her married life. She rides off with a Greek traveller, Nearchus. However, it costs her the same fate as Eve. From the position of being a wife, she now assumes the identity of Yaduri—the fallen woman: "Yaduri . . . in swearing and profane language of men, the word also signified a yoni, a woman's private part" (Gokhale 119).

Though Shakuntala surrenders to unbridled pleasures with Nearchus yet she is not satisfied. Her real desire is not that of sex but it is for knowledge and her quest for her inner self. Soon she becomes disillusioned with her relationship with Nearchus also when he starts objectifying her. She abandons him too, however to reach her tragic doom. Wandering in Kashi,

the city of her dreams and desire, she is hit to death by a raged bull. However, in this doom she gets her redemption. In the last hours of her life she makes it clear that she had set out in search of a part of herself and that she “had not traded one life for another” (Gokhale 194).

Namita Gokhale, in the end of the novel, very skillfully portrays Shakuntala’s soul abandoning her body which was subject to the worldly bondages and sacraments. She emerges as a unique genius to re-interpret the cursed samskara of abandonment as a kind of boon in favour of women to establish their individuality and true self. Her philosophy finds a clear expression in Shakuntala’s final assertion that:

I realized, that I had lived my life one way rather than another. The world would always have its way; at least I had searched for mine. That was the Taraka, Shiva’s mantra of deliverance. (Gokhale 207)

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