

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S A HIMALAYAN LOVE STORY

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper, entitled "Female Characters in Namita Gokhale's Novel, A Himalayan Love Story", published in 1996, is to study the female characters from feminist perspective. It aims at examining various women characters and their patterns of behavior depicted in Namita Gokhale's novel. The term feminism is a very wide one and it comprises within itself a good number of ideas about feminist consciousness and female identity reflected by using feminist perspectives. Feminism is an ideology that includes social, cultural and political movements regarding gender discrimination and rights of women in the patriarchal society. It deliberates very strongly and revolts against the inequality, gender discrimination, under treatment and subordination of female in the male dominated society. The very common perception of the feminist thinkers and writers was that the women from all over the world have been deprived of their rights, fundamental as well as natural from generation to generation. Resultantly, there is a big upheaval and protest of the feminist thinkers in the 20th and 21st century world literature. Namita Gokhale is one of the leading novelists of this generation. The present paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the major female characters in the novel. The second section analyses some minor female characters in the novel by using feminist perspectives and the third section concludes the paper.

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FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S *A HIMALAYAN LOVE STORY*

- Sangram More

In Namita Gokhale's *A Himalayan Love Story*, she has dealt with a good number of women characters. But the most major important character is that of Parvati, the protagonist of the novel. She is the central and most crucial character and the entire novel revolves around her irrespective of her presence or absence. Parvati is portrayed as a doomed girl right from the beginning till the end of the novel. She lives with her mother in a highly poor condition. Her father dies of tuberculosis in her childhood only. She is taken care of by her mother, but, soon she too dies of tuberculosis leaving her daughter orphaned and at the mercy of her distant uncle, Hiranand Joshi, the Headmaster in high school in Nainital.

As a child she experiences a lot of miserable situations that shape her personality negatively. She faces extreme poverty while her mother is alive. As a child she is terribly shocked to see her widowed mother in the arms of the kirana shopkeeper, living in their building as a tenant. It was an illicit and immoral sexual act of her illiterate and beautiful mother. To make matters worse, her mother drinks liquor and enjoys the sexual encounter with the stranger. This incident has a long and lasting impact on the tender mind of Parvati. She never forgets it. She writes after she sees the scene thus:

My world was shattered. People were not as they appeared. There was another life behind their masks. Years later, when I was wheeled in for surgery from the asylum in Bareilly I experienced the same sensation when I went under anesthesia... I could not

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confront her with what I had seen It was her shadow, her evil twin that I had glimpsed downstairs. (P. 90)

To find her beautiful young mother in the arms of a stranger, Parvati is terribly shocked. But the mother whose husband dies in his youth, revolts against the social ethics. Instead of living like a faithful and chaste widow of the deceased, she establishes physical relations with a stranger and enjoys her life fully. Parvati witnesses everything from the window of the house. Perhaps, it is because of this experience that in her youth, she does not hesitate to establish sexual relations with Salman, the Muslim History teacher in college. Salman is young and extremely handsome teacher in Nainital. When once Parvati is admitted in the hospital for treatment, she gets her first experience of sex. She says, "I left Wee Nooke as a girl, I returned a woman" (91).

Parvati lives in the company of Mukul Nainwal and Lalit Joshi as close friends. They eat together, wander together and even go to the cinema theatre. Mukul falls in love with her and wants to marry her. Hiranand Joshi decides to marry her with Lalit. In spite of all this, she falls prey to Salman. She knows very well that Salman is simply a shadow in her life. She is sure that one day he will leave Nainital for USA or Mumbai. She is in reality attracted towards Mukul, but when opportunity knocks at her door, she snatches it, indulges in love making with Salman. She very bluntly says, "I enjoyed flirting with Mukul Nainwal. His absolute adoration and the transparent ploys he employed to be with me were balm to my soul." (P. 93) Thus, though Mukul provides her with blaming effect, she falls victim to the mesmerizing handsomeness of Salman, a shadow for her. As per her expectations one day Salman disappears from Nainital, without disappointing Parvati. She takes it very casually and does not even enquire about Salman.

Parvati thus loves Mukul Nainwal, lets Salman seduce her body and finally marries Lalit Joshi. It was Hiranand Johi's strong desire that she should marry Lalit due to his caste. The disappointed and frustrated Mukul leaves Nainwal for his

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better future after Parvati's marriage with Lalit Joshi. She is not at all happy in her married life due to the strange behaviour of Lalit. He does not make her happy and always runs away from her. Here, too, the frustrated Parvati then establishes immoral sexual relations with Raju, Lalit's younger brother. It is only at the far end of his life that Lalit begins to love her, appreciates her cooking and sleeps with her. Like her father and mother, her husband too becomes the victim of tuberculosis and dies a tragic death, leaving behind the pregnant Parvati. It is after the death of Lalit, Parvati gives birth to a girl who is named as Irra. She then apparently goes mad and is admitted in the mental hospital. She says, "I wept a lot, sometimes I screamed. The doctors come again ... sometimes I laughed without reason ... I started laughing again, the laughter felt well. It released me". (P. 50) the novelist has thus depicted Parvati in all her moods right from her childhood to the end.

As a young daughter she is praiseworthy as she helps her mother all household duties including collecting the firewood. After the death of her mother, she takes the entire responsibility of Hiranand Joshi's house and looks after all things very nicely. She proves to be a good daughter. As a young and beautiful girl she is very dashing and courageous enough to play with three persons at a time – Mukul Nainwal, Lalit Joshi and Salman. She loves all of them. Instead of playing a very modest, chaste and ideal Indian girl, she does not bother to have sexual relations with Salman and an extramarital affair with her husband's younger brother. She does not hesitate while doing so and never repents for her adventures. In this sense, she is portrayed as a new woman of the modern times. In spite of all this Mukul Nainwal loves her and returns to Nainital in his middle age only for her sake. Even the lunatic Parvati is 'Durga', 'Kali' and 'Saraswati' for him. It is in a way a great victory of Parvati that only for her sake Mukul comes all the way from Hong Kong.

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In addition to Parvati, the protagonist of the novel, there are a few minor characters who have an impact in shaping the plot of the novel. Irra, the daughter of Parvati is portrayed as an independent young girl. She is young, aspiring beautiful and a highly practical minded girl. Being the daughter of Parvati, she suffers a lot. But due to her uncle she goes to college and strongly desires to become a doctor in order to stand on her own feet. She is very talkative and caring girl with a very high sense of hospitality. It is Irra, who takes care of Mukul after his return from Hong Kong. As an independent girl she learns to be careful. She comes very close to Mukul but at the time of his departure she does not become emotional. She very frankly and openly accepts the fact of his returning to his wife. Her only expectation is that while distributing the property of Hiranand Joshi, her mother's claim should be considered.

Adeleine is another important character. She is the daughter of a Burmese father and an English mother. She is a widow, with a daughter from her first husband. When Mukul receives letter from Hiranand Joshi, he decides to go back to Nainital. This decision of Mukul disappoints Adeleine. She tries to prevent him from his decision but in vain. She is not a much important character and has to play only a small role in the novel. But her being the wife of Mukul, she parallels Parvati. Though Mukul wants to be with Parvati, finally he has to go back to Adeleine leaving his mission incomplete. Pasang Rampa, the Tibetan girl is yet another feminist character in the novel. She is beautiful, independent, practical, self-dependent and business minded girl. She wants to get a visa to Hong Kong. And for that purpose she establishes close contacts with Mukul. She does not even hesitate to share his bed. Mukul writes about their physical contact in a very suggestive manner. He writes, "I was in Pasang Rampa's room. It is late at night. My body searches for something or someone my soul dimly remembers. The woman beside me is lying naked, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. She is slender and vulnerable". (P. 185) In fact she is in love with a Christian youth and has decide to marry him shortly. In spite of

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her love affair with her boyfriend, she surrenders her body very easily to Mukul Nainwal. Like Parvati she too is disappointed to know that Mukul decides to go back to his wife and his wife's daughter.

Even Hiranand Headmaster can be considered as a feminist character. It is he who opens school for girls. Parvati's mother was not much keen on educating her daughter due to her financial condition. But after her death it is Hiranand Headmaster who sends Parvati for higher education. Mukul too is very kind and considerate towards Parvati in particular and all women in general. He is deeply in love with Parvati but unfortunately he cannot marry her due to the caste hierarchy. After Parvati's marriage he leaves Nainital and goes out to try his future and fortune. He joins IRS and lives in Hong Kong. There he marries one widow and confirms his faith in widow-marriages. This incident shows his modern feminist approach. In spite of his married life he cannot forget his first love, Parvati. When the opportunity comes to see Parvati, he even in his middle age, returns to Nainital. He becomes nostalgic and wants to meet his old and first love at the earliest. Here too he is totally disappointed. So we can say that he is the most important character in the novel, after Parvati. If Parvati is the woman protagonist, Mukul is male protagonist.

The novel, *A Himalayan Love Story*, is thus a very fine study in feminism. Namita Gokhale, a champion of the women's cause, has dealt with women's problem from feminist perspective. The story of Parvati is a very realistic picture of female existence. The blurb of the novel says:

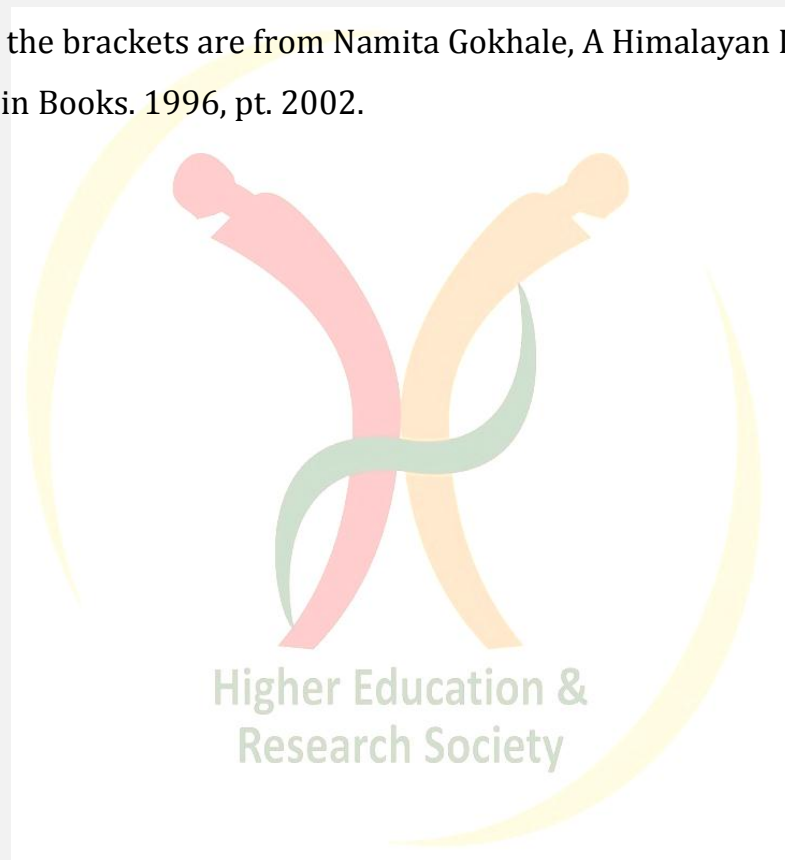
Parvati is young, beautiful and seemingly doomed; blooming early yet unable to find lasting love. Orphaned in adolescence and adopted by her headmaster uncle, she escapes the constraints of this temporary home, but like many young women before her, finds a new prison in marriage (Blurb of the Novel).

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The novel, *A Himalayan Love Story* is thus a very fine study in feminism which presents a good number of feminist characters, Parvati being the most important of them all.

Works Cited:

Page numbers in the brackets are from Namita Gokhale, *A Himalayan Love Story*, and Penguin Books. 1996, pt. 2002.



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