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Suhasini VINCENT-PRABAKAR

River Diegesis in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the meandering moods of the celestial river, the Ganges, reflect the authorial intent of recounting the tale of 'journey' as an absorbing metaphor of the human condition. We shall see how Namita Gokhale subverts age-old traditions, engages in role-reversals and attempts to topple the existing patriarchal structure through her retelling of Indian myths and legends. I shall show how by making allusions to Kalidasa's ancient play, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* and by figuring the legend of Shakuntala in *The Mahabharatha*, Gokhale configures ancient and changing Indian customs and traditions, reframes older narratives keeping in mind the dilemmas faced by the modern Indian woman and highlights the need for reconfiguring new worlds. Can we consider the act of 'narrativization' or the 'retelling' of a narrative as a means of understanding historical changes in postcolonial society and ideology? Viney Kirpal, in her essay "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" explains that the Indian novel has been misunderstood because of the lack of "a relevant critical framework" (145). Contending that "the Indian novel is an inheritor of two literary traditions and not one as both Eurocentric criticism and neo-Sanskrit criticism make it out to be," Viney Kirpal maintains that the Indian novel adapted and modified a Western form of literary expression "so that it would authentically mirror the Indian mind and society" ("What is the Modern Third World Novel?" 145). My study of Namita Gokhale's retelling of myths and legends will consider the psychodynamics of orality, the intermingling of the new and the old and highlight the rapport between the modern and the traditional that exists in contemporary India. We shall see how Namita Gokhale blends together various strands of old tales, creates new variants and new aesthetic forms pertinent to the present age and transforms the fictional landscape.

In Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the river Ganges mirrors the novel's diegesis. The novel's opening and final scenes are cast near the banks of this holy river, alive with the "glow of prayer flames ..." (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 4). The narrative flows like the Ganges, the perennial river, lively, yet dangerous and eventful, and mirrors the protagonist's meandering moods. The language itself reflects how Gokhale straddles scribal and oral forms of expression: the accumulation of adjectives through initially voiced plosives and vibrated notes suggesting violence serve to describe the river as "a ribbon of rage, blue in summer, brown when the rains lashed the hills" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 9); the frequent use of paracheisis or the repetition of the same sounds of words in close succession as in "the sound of the river, sobbing or sighing or singing a tuneful melody as the seasons dictated" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 41); the epithetical heaping together of a confused medley of qualifiers in "the Ganga lapping at the rocks, licking and kissing the black stones, a loving, forgiving, easy-going river on a late spring afternoon" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 63); and musification as in "the sound of the waves like a caress," (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 208) where priority is accorded to the text's sound patterns accompanied by a simultaneous neglect of its other aspects, notably its meaning. The Ganges in Hindu mythology is called as *Ganga Ma* or the Mother River Goddess. Hindus believe that the waters of the river can cleanse the sins of the faithful and lead the dead on their last journey to heaven. In his work *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Abbé J.A. Dubois explains that Brahmins perform the *sam-kalpa*, an invocation to the river Goddess, Ganga, by addressing the following prayer to the sacred river: "O Ganges! Who were born in Brahma's pitcher, whence you descended in streams on to Siva's hair, from Siva's hair to Vishnu's feet, and thence flowed on to the earth to wash out the sins of all men, to purify them and promote their happiness" (273). The opening lines of *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* reveal the same tones of the Brahman's prayer and highlight the protagonist's quest to be cleansed and to be released from the cycle of 'samsara' or re-

incarnation. The ‘textualized orature’ or the ‘secondary form of orature’ engages in splitting clauses into sentences, placing them in direct succession as in oral speech, depriving the text of any markers indicating co-ordination or subordination: “Banaras; holy Kashi. The city of Shiva. The faithful arrive here in the hope of departure ... Death lives here, forever mocking life and its passage” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 1). As a river confined to the celestial regions, the river goddess Ganga in the *Mahabharatha* grants a boon to King Bhagiratha who had engaged in austerities for the period of a millennium to see the river Goddess in her bodily form.

The king replied to the daughter of the Himalaya, ‘Boon-granting river, my grandfathers were sped to the realm of Yama by Kapila, when they were for searching for their horse. The sixty thousand Great-spirited Sagaras encountered Kapila’s splendor and were instantly destroyed. As long as you do not wash their bodies, a sojourn in heaven will be denied to my dead ancestors.’ (*Mahabharatha The Book of the Forest* 107.15)

To sustain the impact of the celestial river’s fall onto the earth, Lord Shiva caught the river Ganges in his brow as she cascaded down from heaven to the Himalayas. The river restored the Sagaras and lifted them to paradise and split into seven streams or the seven sacred rivers of India called as the *Sapta-sindhava*.¹ As the Ganges revived the ashes of Bhagiratha’s ancestors, Hindus believe that if the ashes of the dead float in the river, the dead would sail smoothly into their next life, or be freed from ‘*samsara*’ or the cycle of death and rebirth.

Gokhale merges various Eastern and Western diegetic courses of rivers in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. Like the Greek rivers of the Underworld, the Styx and the Lethe,² the novel emphasises the existence of separate regions: the celestial realms set aside for the ‘blessed,’ and lower depths in the Underworld consigned to the ‘sinner’ for chastisement. In Greek mythology, the Lethe denotes ‘oblivion’ and the ‘Styx’ indicates ‘hatred.’ In

¹ The Ganges split into seven streams from Siva’s brow: Dwadini, Pavani and Nalini that took an eastern course; Vakshu, Sita and Sindhu that traced a path towards the west; and the seventh stream followed the trajectory set by Bhagiratha, and hence was called Bhagirathi or the Ganga.

² The other three rivers of the Underworld in Greek mythology are Pyriphlegethon (‘Blazing with Fire’) and Kokytos (‘Lamentation’) that flow into the River Acheron (‘River of Woe’).

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Lethe meanders through Hades to the sunless cave of Hypnos where its murmuring trickle lulls the dead soul into a state of drowsiness. A sip of the Lethe's waters induces forgetfulness and prepares the soul to be reborn again.

An arm of Lethe, with a gentle flow
 Arising upwards from the rock below,
 The palace moats, and o'er the pebbles creeps,
 And with soft murmurs calls the coming sleep. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses Book XI*: 606-09)

In *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, Richard Buxton explains that the Lethe is “the river whose water, when imbibed, caused the dead to forget their earlier existence,” while the “Styx was a river which flowed ... down a sheer precipice, and brought death to humans and to every other creature” (209).

Down a steep yawning cave, where Yews, display'd
 In arches meet, and lend a baleful shade,
 Thro' silent labyrinths a passage lies
 To mournful regions, and infernal skies.
 Here Styx exhales its noisome clouds, and here,
 The funeral rites once paid, all souls appear. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses Book IV*: 429-34)

Gokhale intermingles the twin characteristics of ‘oblivion’ and ‘hatefulness’ distinctive of the Greek Underworld Rivers with the soul-cleansing powers of the Ganges by bestowing the river with qualities of forgetfulness, force and purifying powers. Further eulogising of the city of Kashi reveal Shakuntala's intent of freeing herself from the cycle of birth and rebirth: “Shiva, bending over the dead and the dying, whispered his *mantra* of deliverance into the ears of corpses. The Taraka *mantra* liberated them, ferried them across the river of oblivion to the far shores of *moksha*” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 137). The reference to the Greek river of ‘oblivion,’ the Lethe, is juxtaposed with the allusion to Shiva's Taraka *mantra* or ‘*mantra* of deliverance’ or ‘boat *mantra*’ that enables its invoker to overcome ‘*samsara*’ or re-incarnation and attain liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. A blind priest on the banks of the

Ganges guides Shakuntala, helps her accept an earlier life that binds her to ‘*samsara*’ and shows her the path to ‘oblivion.’

‘You have been here before, sister,’ he says, ‘by this river, on these very ghats.’ ...
 ‘Our pasts live on. Each one of us carries the residue of unresolved karmas, the burden of debts we have to repay. Sister, you cannot run away. Confront this life. Only in acceptance will you find release.’ (Gokhale *Shakuntala* 4)

In the quest for ‘oblivion’ and the ‘void of forgetfulness,’ the Greek goddess of the underworld, Hecate, guides Shakuntala and performs her role of blessing the paths of the travelling souls as is evident in the reference: “Hecate guides them through the past, the present, and the future” (Gokhale *Shakuntala* 117). In Greek mythology, Hecate is known as the “dread goddess” as well as “the granter of victory and bringer of prosperity” (Buxton, *World of Greek Mythology* 84). Gokhale includes the presence of Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, to highlight the soul’s passage into the Underworld. “It is time for the evening aarthi. The glow of prayer-flames reflects on the Ganga. Through the clamour of the gongs and conches I hear the howling bells. There is no silence between their ringing; even the echoes resound endlessly” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 4). The cacophony of noises evoked through the collision of harsh syllables in ‘gongs’ and ‘conches’ is reiterated by the redundant repetition of the words ‘echo’ and ‘resound.’ By figuring images of funeral rites, emphasising the infernal and uncanny nature of Hecate’s diabolic persona, and by making an allusion to the blowing of funeral conches and howling noises of hounds and clashing bells, the narrator describes the soul’s passage through ‘oblivion’ and the sacred river’s course leading to immortality.

A soul in flight is a dazzling sight, it shines and gleams and glitters for those who can see it. The furies who accompany the lord of death sighted my soul fleeing like a radiant butterfly and hunted after it. But the lady of the burning ghats, the devourer of desires, habituated to greed and fear and grasping, to craven pleading, was moved by the courage of my battling soul, and granted it safe passage. Ganga, granter of immortality. (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 199)

Namita Gokhale juxtaposes opposing images of the radiant happy soul with dark pictures of Kali, the devourer of death, waiting to ingest the new arrival. The reference to the Furies or Erinyes³ of Greek mythology, who pursued anyone guilty of shedding kin-blood, reveals the protagonist's agony at having lost twin babies during childbirth. Like the ferryman of the dead in Greek mythology, Charon, who receives a soul from Hermes, the guider of souls, and prepares to ferry it into the Underwater, Gokhale features the fearsome goddess of Death in Hindu mythology, Kali, as the receiver of ill-fated souls into the world of the dead, but however embodies the goddess with qualities of compassion and empathy and accentuates the role of the Ganges in assuring Shakuntala's safe passage into the heavens.

Gokhale demonstrates how Shakuntala's excursion into the past is not an escape from the present, but a 'coming to grips' with her present realities of living. The blind protagonist comments on the 'river' as a metaphor of life's journey:

'Life is a river,' he continued, 'and all life is embodied in this river, this Ganga that flows through our lives. *Bhavishya gyana da, bhoot gyana da, vartaman gyana da,*⁴ she carries in her the secrets of the future, the past, and the ever-flowing present.'
(Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 63)

As the novel's diegesis reveals, the journey to the past gives Shakuntala an opportunity to recreate and relive the past in the present. The journey theme is expressed in the protagonist's enumeration of wishful fantasies and the need to have "glimpses of new lands, people, ideas" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 48). The protagonist's preoccupation with the Ganges is evident in the harmonic fluidity and cadence of oral delivery expressed through the arrangement of rhythmic consonants that voice the inner tune of the protagonist's craving to follow the silver river's diegesis: "I wished I were a river, to flow where I pleased, to wash the world with my waters"

³ The triad Alekto ('Relentlessness'), Megaira ('She who bears a grudge') and Tisiphone ('Avenger of Bloodshed') in Greek mythology hounded murderers who killed an individual related by blood (Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* 86).

⁴ A Hindi phrase that means 'knowledge of the future, the past and the present.'

(Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 92). The river's steady presence in the novel's diegesis serves to restate the idea that life is a journey and the protagonist acknowledges its comforting presence: "Days and nights of travel, the river a constant by our side" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 124). The protagonist grapples with questions on human existence and muses, "If life is a river we must be the fish," and the philosophical reply is given in the form of a chiasmus or the placing in inverse order of the segments formed by two syntactically identical groups of words: "The fish are the river, as the river is the fish" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 63). Shakuntala realizes that the river Ganges though immortal in the minds of humans existed thanks to the reverence of other protagonists in the journey of life. The novel closes with Shakuntala accepting the reality that life itself is a long journey, beautiful, yet beset with difficulties. The voyage gives the traveller experience but the worldly knowledge, experience and wisdom is futile without self-discovery: "I had not wasted my life. I had lived. Like a minor wind, I saw myself afloat and rising" (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 208). Through a journey back in time, Gokhale shows how memory has the power to discover the self. By finding an anchor in the past, Shakuntala accepts the present and charts the course for future action.

In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Namita Gokhale fashions the protagonist keeping in mind the celestial nymph in the epic tale of the *Mahabharatha*. In the *Mahabharatha*, the origin myth of the founder of the Bharatha clan encompasses the narrative of Sakuntala⁵ as related by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya, who in turn narrates it in the course of reciting the epic on the occasion of a major sacrificial ritual. The narrative of Sakuntala from the *Mahabharatha* relates the tale of Sakuntala as the abandoned offspring of sage Viswamithra and the apsara Menaka. She is named Sakuntala by her foster father, sage Kanva, who receives her from sakunta or birds who encircled her, protected her from harm, and cared for

⁵ Shakuntala is spelt differently in different retellings of the legend: in the *Mahabharatha*, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Braj-katha*, Tagore's critical essay "Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning", George Forster's translation and Goethe's verse the spelling is 'Sakuntala'; in the translated work of William Jones, the spelling is 'Shakoontala.' Namita Gokhale uses the contemporary spelling 'Shakuntala.' In my quotations I have retained the original spelling in the different works.

the forsaken child of nature. The epic tale highlights the *gandharva* union between King Dushyanta and Sakuntala, one of the eight forms of marriage advocated in the *Mahabharatha*.⁶ King Dushyanta considers the *gandharva* union as “lawful for the baronage” (*Mahabharatha: The Book of the Beginning* 67:10). The epic tale approves the *gandharva* union and deems that “the *gandharva* style of marriage is said to be the best for a baron, done in secret without formulas, between a loving man and a loving woman” (*Mahabharatha, The Book of the Beginning* 68: 25). The *Bhagavata Purana* relates how Shakuntala “developed an attraction towards the king and they got married under *gandharva* rites without the presence of any witnesses” (Mazumdar, *Tales from the Puranas* 224). In the “Katthahari-Jataka,” E.B. Cowell calls the *gandharva* ceremony as “a union by mutual consent, on the spur of the moment, without any preliminary formalities” (Cowell, *Jataka Tales: Book I* 28). In his essay “Sakuntala: Its inner Meaning,” Rabindranath Tagore describes the *gandharva* marriage as one that “had the wildness of nature joined to the social tie of wedlock” (ix). Namita Gokhale’s Shakuntala dares to enter into a ‘secret’ *gandharva* union with a Greek traveller by ‘mutual consent’ and sets out on a voyage of discovery by following the course of the river Ganges: “I walked down the path. As I reached the river, I could hear his laughter. Taking off my silver anklets, I flung them into the water and ran towards him ... On that pebbled shore I left Shakuntala and all her memories” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 115). The string of verbs ‘walk down,’ ‘take off,’ ‘fling’ and ‘leave’ suggest visual images of departure and are reinforced by the metaphorical gesture of unclasping anklets that fetter the protagonist to traditions and norms of conservative practices.

The autodiegetic narrator relates: “I grew up in mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic. The hill people from our parts were called *vanvasis*, dwellers of the forests. It

⁶ “There are eight forms of marriage known in total being lawful – bhahma, daiva, arsa, prajapatya, asura, gandharva, raksasa, and lastly paisaca. Manu Svayambhuva has declared their lawfulness in this order of descent. The first four are recommended for a Brahmin, the first six are lawful for the baronage. The raksasa mode is set forth for kings, the asura marriage for commoners and serfs”. (*Mahabharatha, The Book of the Beginning* 67:10)

was a harsh life, of very few comforts, and our ways were far removed from those of the *nagariks* or city folk. We had little water to wash, for it was carried up from a great distance down the hill” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 8). Contrasting images of varying lifestyles of the *vanvasis* and the *nagariks* lay stress on the dichotomy between the forest/settlement, meagre/abundant and known/unknown. The reference to pastoral times of the *Mahabharatha* is evident in the naming of the male protagonist as “*Govinda*” or the herder of the cows (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 9), the estimation of the chieftain’s wealth in enumerative pairs of cattle: “herds of bullocks and cows, buffaloes and she-buffaloes, rams and ewes” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 41), the description of pastoral occupations of tending the cows through olfactory metaphors like “the aroma of mountain herbs mingling ... with the odours of milk and dung” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 7). In the *Mahabharatha*, the king is described as *gopta* or the herdsman of the earth, similarly, in Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the pastoral life style of cattle-rearing society is manifest in the allusion to the lineage-based society of clans and heroes: ‘We have a republic, we follow no kings, we bow before no emperor (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 65). The pastoral connotations in Gokhale’s fictional space is evident in the role played by the clansmen in according their approval in the small, well-knit society of herdsman, typical of epic times when the status of the king was not considered absolute. The epic tale in the *Mahabharatha* emphasizes Shakuntala’s chastity, ridicules King Dushyanta’s feigning of non-recognition and highlights the empowerment that a woman attains through the birth of her son. Vasampayana’s narrative elaborates how “Shakuntala, the woman with the lovely thighs gave birth to a son of boundless might, after bearing him for a full three years” (*Mahabharatha: The Book of the Beginning* 68:1). When King Dushyanta rejects Shakuntala by feigning non-recognition, “her eyes turned copper red with indignant fury” and she highlights her role in assuring the continuation of the royal lineage (*Mahabharatha: The Book of the Beginning* 68:20).

In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Gokhale configures elements from Kalidasa's play, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, whose Sanskrit title can be translated as 'The Recognition of Shakuntala.' While staging a scene from the play in her novel, Gokhale's description of Shakuntala bears similarities to Kalidasa's portrayal of *Sakuntala*.

These forest women have beauty
Rarely in royal palaces seen,
The wild wood blooms outglow
The pleasure-garden creeper's sheen. (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 147)

If such is the beauty of maidens residing in a hermitage rare even in a seraglio, then, indeed, are the creepers of the garden surpassed by those of the forest in point of excellence. (Kalidasa, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* 1:16)

Like Kalidasa, Gokhale uses the trope of metonymy opting for the designation of 'forest women' as 'wild wood blooms,' associates 'royal beauty' with the 'pleasure-garden creeper's sheen,' lays stress on the negotiation of visual and oral composition of words, and shows how the alliterative sequence of speech sounds as in 'seen' and 'sheen' serve to reinforce the metaphoric meaning contained in the words 'beauty' and 'outglow.' The stylistic effects link related words, provide tone colour and enhance the palpability of uttering the words. In Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, the playwright selects a fragment from the epic tale in the *Mahabharatha* and converts the narrative into the genre of a play or *nataka*. Unlike the epic bardic recitals of the *Mahabharatha* or the oral narrative folklore of the *Kathasaritsagara*, Kalidasa's play, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, destined for the court of the Gupta kings, is not an oral narrative, but reflects the romantic choice of themes in the courtly episodes. In her work *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, Romila Thapar shows how the dramatic form was a deliberate distancing from the epic since the two genres signified varied literary and social interests.

The play follows the outline of the epic story but introduces some changes which weave in elements of stereotypes from other sources, the whole being structured into a

sophisticated dramatic form. This was a characteristic feature of the nataka, typically heroic drama of a romantic nature; the theme was based on a well-known story, often from the itihasa-purana tradition, but added to it was an element of originality and innovation. (Thapar, “Texts, Readings, Histories” 45)

The element of originality in Kalidasa’s play lies in the playwright’s creation of sub-plots, as when Shakuntala errs in her duties at the hermitage, sage Durwasa’s curse results in the king’s non-recognition of Shakuntala and the loss of the king’s signet ring. In Namita Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the intrusive narrator prepares the fictional terrain for the reader by unravelling the entwining strands of references to Kalidasa’s play.

I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa’s classic drama. My namesake was not mortal like me, she was a nymph, daughter of the celestial apsara Menaka who seduced the sage Viswamitra and stole his seed. That Shakuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her birth father Viswamithra, 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. (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 7)

Like Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* that is located in the mythic past, an epoch when mortals and gods intermingled, Gokhale configures the presence of the divine in the fictional terrain. In Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Lord Shiva’s *Taraka mantra* or *mantra* of deliverance guides the protagonist in her journey towards freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. Unlike Kalidasa’s play set in the fourth to fifth centuries AD during the reign of Chandra Gupta II, Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is set in an unidentifiable time span as the protagonist moves between the worlds of the past and the present. The act of narrating becomes an action of speaking and the alert reader has the task of making sense of the fictive world of the novel with its variant retellings, connects the allusions made to other intertextual elements, and engages in a hermeneutical interpretation of meaning. In Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the inclusion of the tale of ‘the offering of the signet ring’ as a token of love and recognition and the transformation of Shakuntala into a daring and courageous woman like her epic counterpart may be attributed to

the inclusion of features from the Buddhist fable in the “Katthahari-Jataka.” To the bardic recital from the *Mahabharatha*, Kalidasa includes the story of the ring from the “Katthahari-Jataka” that relates a story of the Bodhisattva’s rebirth. In this Jataka tale, King Brahmadata dismisses the Bodhisattva’s mother with these words: “If it be a girl, spend this ring on her nurture; but if it be a boy, bring ring and child to me” (Cowell, *Jataka Tales: Book I* 28), but in the scene of non-recognition when King Brahmadata declares: “He is no son of mine,” the mother daringly proves that her son, the Bodhisattva, is the rightful heir by tossing him into mid-air and saying: “Sire, I have now no witness to prove my words, I pray that he may stay in mid-air; but if not, may he fall to earth and be killed” (Cowell, *Jataka Tales: Book I* 28). In this Buddhist fable, the Bodhisattva rises, maintains his cross-legged posture in mid-air and declares the truth to King Brahmadata.

Your son am I, great monarch; rear me, Sire!

The king rears others, but much more his child. (Cowell, *Jataka Tales: Book I* 29)

The tale ends with the Bodhisattva descending from mid-air onto the lap of King Brahmadata, thus finding his rightful place as the royal heir. In Gokhale’s narrative, the Greek traveller offers a signet ring to Shakuntala, but she returns the ring and shows no fancy for a “memento of her secret marriage” (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 148). Unlike Kalidasa’s play and the fable from the “Katthahari-Jataka” in which the signet ring binds the events of the story, in Gokhale’s fictional space, Shakuntala refuses the ring, thus emphasises the futility of non-recognition associated with the ring in the Jataka fable and Kalidasa’s play. Gokhale thus reshapes the tale to configure an alternative reality. In Gokhale’s *Shakuntala*, the novel ends with the protagonist rising up to the skies with the knowledge that her life had been well lived: “I had not wasted my life. I had lived” (*Shakuntala* 208). Gokhale, like Kalidasa centres the action of the play in the green world of Nature, and figures an escape from the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. By framing the novel’s diegesis like the play’s action, Gokhale casts the idea of attaining a state superior to ‘*samsara*’ or rebirth, a final break from the Hindu

eternal cycle of death and rebirth and the quest of the Indian woman to attain a state of fulfilment that is free from the fetters of patriarchal discourse. By taking the theme from Kalidasa's play, filling it out with sub-plots and reworking the themes of the curse and the signet ring, Namita Gokhale configures Kalidasa's mingling of the supernatural from Indian mythology with the themes of the Gupta period. She moulds together varied presentations of Shakuntala and assembles together these strands from the past to construct a new variant compatible with contemporary perspectives.

Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* has layers of historical retellings hidden beneath its surface: the epic fragment in the *Mahabharatha*, Kalidasa's play, its appearance in the Western literary scenario through the translations of William Jones and George Forster, Goethe's verse epigram and Tagore's cultural interpretation in his essay "Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning". I shall trace the narrative's recreation across the ages, the dialogue between the past and the present, the co-existence of the old and the new, and the changing gender perspectives in each retelling. Like the epic narrative in the *Mahabharatha*, Gokhale frames the narrative keeping in mind the patriarchal society of epic times where a barren wife had to perform the *Agnicayana* ceremony. Thus, Gokhale selects a strand from the epic rendering to illustrate how the birth of a son was crucial in conferring status to a woman in clan-based social order as she was the bond to kinship and her son ensured her belonging to the clan. From the epic narrative to Kalidasa's play, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, there is a change in the portrayal of Shakuntala. Unlike her epic counterpart, Shakuntala of the Gupta court play is timid, self-effacing and subservient. She admits, "though smitten with love, I am not master of myself" (*Abhijnana Sakuntalam* 3:21). Unlike the epic tale that highlights the importance of the son and the status gained by the mother through the birth of a son, in the courtly play, the theme of romantic love is highlighted, the status of women is relegated to the background, the epic insistence on the father's responsibility for the child is

ignored by introducing sub-plots of the curse, the loss of the ring and the episodes of non-recognition. In Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the sub-plots are altered with the protagonist declining the ring, refusing to adhere to the norms of patriarchal society and undertaking a journey to begin a new life. Unlike her epic and play counterparts, Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala* imagines a girl child in her womb and does not show any craving for a male offspring, thus reversing the tale to suit the changing times. With translations launching Kalidasa's play onto the Western literary scenario, German romanticism perceived *Shakuntala* as the 'rustic maiden.'

Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline,
And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted and fed?
Wouldst thou the heaven and earth itself in one sole name combine?
I name thee, O Sakontala! And all at once is said (Goethe, quoted by Tagore in
"Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" vii).

Goethe's verse praises Kalidasa's blending of nature with the sublime by merging the 'blossoms of Spring' with the 'fruits of Autumn' and by uniting 'Heaven' and Earth' in classical verse. Romila Thapar in "Histories of a Narrative" traces how nineteenth century nationalism in India "fostered a conservative attitude towards tradition, because to question it was a concession to western ideas" (20). Influenced by the perspectives of his time, in 1907, Rabindranath Tagore highlights the aspect of morality in his essay, "Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning."

We are apt to pass over this eulogy lightly as a mere poetic outburst. We are apt to consider that it is only means in effect that Goethe regarded *Sakuntala* as fine poetry. But it is not so; His stanza breathes not the exaggeration of rapture, but the deliberate judgement of a true critic. There is a special point in his words. Goethe says expressly that *Sakuntala* contains the history of a development – the development of flower into fruit, of earth into heaven, of matter into spirit (Tagore "Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" vii).

Tagore contends that Kalidasa's play shows the "fall" of Shakuntala and the consequences of immorality, but at the same time he considers the 'innate chastity' of Shakuntala (Tagore, "Shakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" viii). Tagore argues that the "drama was meant not for dealing with a particular passion, not for developing a particular character, but for translating the whole subject from one world to another – to elevate love from the sphere of physical beauty to the eternal heaven of moral beauty" (Tagore, "Shakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" viii). In *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, Romila Thapar explains the reasons for Tagore's description of the *gandharva* union as "the wildness of nature joined to the social tie of wedlock" (Tagore, "Shakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" ix). She traces the cause for Tagore's stance to the criticism aimed at Tagore's play, *Chitrangada*, in 1892, when the playwright was criticised for the enactment of the *gandharva* marriage. Thapar writes about Tagore's defence about the play being 'sensuous' like good poetry and not 'immoral'. Thapar points out that the 'sensuous' in Indian art and literature was often defended as being symbolic of the spiritual.

Thus each version of the tale of Shakuntala comes out of a course of selection and embedded in this process is the contemporising of the representation of Shakuntala. Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala is cast as the independent woman who rejects the shackles of marriage, frees herself from the fetters of norms and conventions established by society, and faces the consequences without any fears:

I felt revived, redeemed. Everything seems possible again. It was incongruous, but I was singing, a hymn to the morning goddess. I sang it softly, for it was meant only for my daughter's ears. I was a strong woman. I walked across the garden to the path along the river. I was not afraid to walk alone (Gokhale, *Shakuntala* 174).

In her essay "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" Viney Kirpal comments on how the contemporary Indian woman novelist finds "freedom from inherited patterns of thought and action in favour of new modes, arrived at independently after much consideration of the

various aspects of the problem, keeping also in view the kind of society she lives in” (148). The chain of changing narratives of the tale of Shakuntala reveals the alteration of gender perspectives. In “Narratives and the Making of History”, Romila Thapar states, “We select from the past those images from the present. These contribute to the construction of the self-image of our contemporary culture and its projection back into what is believed to be ‘tradition’” (22-3). By selecting strands from the past, Namita Gokhale creates a new ‘tradition’ by selectively choosing fragments of past narratives that are compatible with the present and that legitimise various codes of contemporary conduct and beliefs.

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Short Abstract

River Diegesis in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Namita Gokhale exploits the meandering moods of the celestial River Ganges to reflect 'journey' as a compelling metaphor of the human condition. By combining the oral tradition of storytellers and saints from Hindu religious teaching with tales from ancient Indian folklore, Namjoshi juxtaposes the *Akhanya* or narrative of Shakuntala as given in the *Adi Parvan* of the *Mahabharatha* with the fourth century play, the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* of Kalidasa. This paper shall thus consider how the retelling of myths and legends reflects the ways in which Gokhale creates critical and conceptual spaces for the voices of women to be heard and highlights the postcolonial novelistic need for reconfiguring new worlds.