



Thematic Concern of Namita Gokhale's Novel *The Himalayan Love Story*

Anuradha

Assistant Professor of English Lala Hansraj Phutela law college, Sirsa

Abstract: Namita Gokhale is one of the prominent novelists writing in English. She depicts the challenges which women face women in their personal, professional, religious and socio-political levels. Through her novels, Namita Gokhale has projected the dreams and desires of Indian women in a remarkable way. She has depicted women in the context of the contemporary world as an individual with freedom of choices. The modern Indian women appear as the protagonists of her novels. With the help of her novels, Gokhale has very skillfully captured the Indian ethos. She exhibits a deep insight into human nature and understanding of day-to-day problems. The themes dealt by her depict clash between modernity and tradition, Indian woman's search for independence, the East-West conflict and freedom struggle movement. In her works, Namita Gokhale interweaves two distinct strands of primary topics and their collaterals before joining them all together to form a cohesive whole. The desire for harmony and balance in a world full of conflicts and tensions is related to the second thematic pattern in her writings. The present paper brings to light the major themes of Gokhale's novel *The Himalayan Love Story*.

Keywords: Theme, relationships, conflict, independence, understanding.

Namita Gokhale was born in Lucknow, India in 1956. She spent her childhood between New Delhi and Nainital, in the foothills of the Himalayas. She married Rajiv Gokhale and moved to Bombay where Gokhale worked as a film journalist. She then published the enormously successful film magazine "Super" from Bombay in the late seventies. She has written both fiction and non-fiction. When Gokhale takes up any feministic themes, she does not deal with only the questions of marriage, divorce, sexuality and woman's equality with man but also the cultural, religious and social environment in which a woman lives as well as the question of love, hatred and jealousy and certain other human emotions and values. Besides, she also dwells on the significance of essential humanism, the question of freedom, the growth of individuality, the quest for self-fulfillment, the impact of religion on man's life, various human values and the antithesis between idealism and pragmatism, illusion and reality. All of her works are written in different ways as she herself puts it into her own words:

Most people do write the same novel again and again. I try to fight that. I try to change the locations. Paro was high life. Gods, Graves and Grandmother was a novel about street life. But however much I change the sets and the props, you do find that you do write the same story again and again. (Swapan K Banerjee, *The Statesman*)

Namita Gokhale runs her readers through a roller-coaster of emotions in her commendable novel *A Himalayan Love Story* which trails the lives of Parvati and Mukul. Both Parvati and Mukul grow up together in the Himalayan town of Nainital. One gets trapped in an unhappy arranged marriage and finally ends up in a mental asylum. The other one flees the restrictive and conservative hill tribes to live in Hong Kong. He returns in the middle age to fulfill the last wishes of his former teacher, and to search for an unrequited teenage love. This novel has a story of fierce sexuality and unrequited love. It is one of the tenderest stories of the genre. It has several themes that can be broadly separated for discussion: the themes of human relationships, women's bonding, death and fear. The theme of death and agony runs as a current all through the novel; the theme of marriage gives rise to women's issues and pushes the novel towards a feminist discussion; the theme of human relationships; and finally the theme of women's bonding gives a psychological dimension to the novel.

A Himalayan Love Story (1996) opens with a sentence from the heroine Parvati, "I have always recognized that I carry emptiness inside me, though I did not at first understand it" (HLS 03). The sentence immediately shows that the story to follow will be comprised of a failed romance and will be what some reviewers described as "sensitively told". The novel speaks of a woman's need to love, rather than the objects of love. Real love is not about sexual conquest; it is not a triumphant place, but a space of surrender. The story is told in two parts. Parvati, the first part, tells about her deprived childhood in a reasonably civilized part of the Himalayan foothills. She grew up in Jeolikote, a popular tourist halt on the road to Nainital. She lives with her mother in two rooms perched above a small kirana shop which belongs to her maternal uncle, Heeranand Joshi, who is the headmaster of a public school in Nainital. Parvati's father died of tuberculosis when she was a year old. She is the only child of her parents. Parvati and her mother both hate Heeranand Joshi who is a mean and humorless man though he has provided them with the house and allows them to collect rent from the kirana shop for their sustenance. Heeranand Joshi also despises them in return but the reason is unknown but Parvati suspects some ancient and unequal childhood rivalry. Gokhale is very much familiar with the Uttaranchal region and in *A Himalayan Love Story* she basically deals with the themes of harsh living conditions in India, adaptations to



changing environments and hardships and sadness of rural north Indians. The novelist has minutely described rural life in the novel. She writes:

Lighting the *choolha* was a strenuous enterprise, involving much huffing and blowing through a metal nali, so that our kitchen was always smoky, and the *dal*, the milk, the *rotis*, all had an acrid taste of smoke. It was my job to gather the firewood. Everyday, after I returned from school, I would deposit my slate and school books under the bed, and set out to look for kindling. The lower branches of mulberry trees and young bushes and lichen- encrusted twigs were all easily accessible, but they burnt badly; they did not light easily, and when they did they crackled and smoked and become ash all at once. (HLS 07)

Parvati's mother is completely illiterate and she got married at the age of thirteen to the second son of a well-to-do family of Almora. Her father quickly spent his entire fortune on gambling and other addictions when at the age of thirty two her father was afflicted with tuberculosis, there was simply no money for his treatment. Parvati is given education on the insistence of Heeranand Joshi though her mother considered it a waste of money. The rent from the kirana shop adequately covered their meager requirements. Parvati mentions:

We had an absolute minimum of needs: two set of clothing each, three warm sweaters between the two of us, and one and a half meals a day. In the mid-morning we ate a meal of watery dal and rice. In the evenings, invariably, we ate potatoes. There were a hundred ways in which my mother knew how to cook potatoes-aloo ke gutke, aloo ka pani, aloo tomato, aloo matar and so on. We had the potatoes with the left over rice. (HLS 09)

Namita Gokhale brings out the strained mother-daughter relationship in the novel. The mother-daughter relationship has always occupied an important place in Gokhale's fiction. She has not valorized the image of mother; instead she has rendered more human qualities to her. The society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered to be a peripheral member of the family, both in her parents' house as well as husbands. Throughout her lifetime she is unable to decide her roots and this leads to her insecurity. As the daughter is closest to the mother, this insecurity is rubbed on to her also. The psychic imbalance stems from the unresolved love-hate relationship between mother and daughter. While tracing the conflicts of her female characters, Gokhale has also explored that sometimes women themselves create conflicts in the lives of other women. To understand the mother-daughter relationship in Gokhale's works it would be appropriate to appreciate the psyche of a mother. Simone de Beauvoir in the chapter on mother writes: some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self-recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world... Vexed at having produced woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: 'You shall be a woman.' She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double; and she also tends to inflict upon her the disadvantages from which she has suffered. (Beauvoir 533)

The mother-daughter relationship is mostly strained due to the double standards of the society. This show from the very paradoxes in Parvati's mother's thinking regarding her daughter. On one hand her mother would bitterly complain about the cost of books and uniforms, although the actual school fees were of course heavily subsidized. A little later, she would say: 'Perhaps masterji is right, Parvati' she said. Your education might turn out to be of some use after all. Look at the post master's daughter; she'll get into service soon. You could become a teacher! (HLS10).

The present novel reveals the desire for an equal partnership between husband and wife, without the need for one to dominate over the other. In the novel, it is projected that the husband imposes on the personal freedom of his wife. She is an educated, thinking woman but her husband gets suspicious of her motives and slaps her: 'How dare you!' He screamed, his eyes dilated with anger and hatred. 'You prying whore!' (HLS35). The novel, *A Himalayan Love Story*, is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. Gokhale looks into the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. Sometimes the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behavior patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity that strained relationships occur. In the novel Parvati and Lalit have strained relationships because of their incompatible temperament. Parvati is dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Lalit is realistic, insensitive and rational. Parvati is poetic and high-strung whereas Lalit detached, philosophical and remote. Parvati has tenderness, softness and warmth. Lalit is hard and cold. Parvati is looking for love; all she gets is its compulsive version:

A sense of physical, bodily fear took hold of me. From that night I began to spread the spare mattress on the floor, preferring to sleep there rather than risk even an accidental encounter with Lalit's scathing, hostile presence. I had been married for over a year, but we were no nearer to consummating our marriage, and by now I had become reconciled to the idea that we never would. (HLS36)

Lalit makes no comment on the new arrangement for sleeping in the kitchen: "We had expeditiously reduced the necessary level of communication to the very barest minimum. Days, weeks would pass in bitter, brooding silence, broken only by innocent visits from the garrulous couple from Ratlam, when we too would put up a front of normalcy



and even happiness”(HLS 38). The unmitigated silences of their lives are broken by the arrival in Bareilly of Lalit's younger brother who has come to the plains in search of job. Just two years younger than Lalit, Raju is different from him in every way. Where Lalit is thrifty, conscientious and hard working, Raju is extravagant, lazy and charming. Soon Parvati has an affair with Raju and she assures herself that this is no betrayal because Raju is not any stranger. Raju eventually returned to Nainital; even after his departure Parvati continues to feel an extraordinary sense of well-being.

In, *A Himalayan Love Story*, Gokhale satirizes the social sanction given to immorality in men, while a woman is expected to be chaste and faithful to a single man by virtue of her marriage to him. She reveals the attitude of the rejected wife and gives a pointer as to how a woman should behave in such a situation. Parvati had hoped to become independent of her traditional constraints and to live as she pleased. But she had to maintain a facade of marital happiness by playing the role of the ideal wife.

In retrospect, she feels that her life with her husband as a perfect wife had been unreal, as she had complied with his wishes against her real nature. Her extra marital sexual encounter with the younger brother of her husband leaves her with no guilt feelings. In fact her attitude to sex becomes impersonal, with no passionate involvement. She realizes it as only a physical necessity, whether it is with her husband or with another man. After the impersonal sexual act, she describes an existential loneliness that she experiences. Parvati does not get the pleasure of married life with Lalit. Except this the expectations of the family members never decreases because the occasional letters of Masterji teaches Parvati about the duties as a wife and a woman. He writes with a note of prophetic warning: “I trust that you will never display that over-masculine approach to life which your dear departed mother sometimes demonstrated”(HLS 39). Parvati's marriage with Lalit results in their estrangement. There was disillusion as well as disorientation which forced her to believe that she is an outsider who was not affected by the waves of sorrow, sympathy and comradeship rippling around her. She isn't able to pull herself away from the pangs of the past; on the other hand she isn't able to find pleasure in her relationship with Lalit. She is quite fed up with the life full of deception.

A Himalayan Love Story presents the oppressive, debilitating life situation of a housewife. This family life is firmly located in its middle class environs. The silence and the silencing of the woman as a gendered subject is the focus of the narrative. But even as the family life is located in the middle-class environs, the narrative maps the position of the middle class. The woman as a gendered subject is the focus of the narrative. But even as the family life is located in the middle-class environs, the narrative maps the position of the middle class. After sometime when Lalit is diagnosed of Tuberculosis and has to get admitted in Bhowali' sanatorium, Parvati tries hard to raise money for the Bhowali sanatorium. She writes a letter to Mukul Nainwal, and another to Masterji, asking for help. But before she could post either of them, Lalit is dead:

What surprised me about death was this: the soul departs, leaving the body forlorn. The body departs, it is taken away, disposed of, it disintegrates, decomposes, it is gone. The ashes are thrown into muddy rivers, ...His nail cutter, a gift from his father, sits safely in the steel box that also holds his watch and wallet. His slippers still lie under the bed, waiting. They did not perish with him. His two suits hang in the cupboard; his shirts lie folded, quiescent. I wonder if they remember him, his smell and his body. (HLS 47)

Lalit's death and Raju's wedding are horribly mixed up in Parvati's mind, a blur of weeping and laughter, death and merriment. Lalit's family is initially affectionate to Parvati and look after her tenderly. They decide not to delay Raju's marriage because of Lalit's death. When Lalit's family goes to Bombay with the baraat, Parvati moves back to Masterji's house and here she comes to know about her pregnancy and is delivered of a girl child, Irra. She then, apparently, goes mad.

The second part of the book is told by Mukul, as he describes his return to Nainital to claim his property and satisfy his curiosity. He finds Parvati insane and Irra now assumed to be his responsibility. Mukul's situation is grotesque and would be tragic if he did not reveal himself to be insufferably pompous. Gokhale describes his dilemma and how he solves it with delicate, precise irony. After fifteen years when he meets Parvati, he sees a stranger, her mind a dark hollow where no one can reach, not the woman he loved to distraction and still loves in a shadow way:

There was no chair in sight, so I sat down on the bed beside her. Still she did not acknowledge my presence. I shook her lightly by the shoulder. She bristled and I withdrew my hand. I looked at my hands, the manicured nails, and the thin band on my little finger, the hairs on my wrists turning white, and the golden strap of my watch. They were pampered, privileged hands.... I began counting the grey hairs upon her head. ‘What are you staring at?’ she asked, turning over and focusing an odd smile on me. ‘We have nothing to say now.’ We sat in silence for a long time. (HLS 181)

With this stark scene, a relationship which could have flowered dies with a whimper that none can hear. In *A Himalayan Love Story* human relationships are explored with all possible pros and cons-husband-wife, mother-daughter, male-female, mother-child, woman-woman bonding and human bonding. Human relationships mean building bridges between situations and across people. The man-woman relationship is based on the bridge of understanding and



common well being. There is an undercurrent of love and affection that gives meaning to it. When love becomes selfishly blind, the bond loosens and misery follows. The author explores the relationships between Parvati and her husband Lalit Joshi, Parvati and the history teacher Salman Siddiqui, Parvati and Mukul Nainwal, the pupil of Masterji. Master Heeranand Joshi is Parvati's maternal uncle. He never marries because he has taken a vow of chastity after reading the collected works of Swami Vivekananda. He is a thin, stern man with a kind smile. He has kept a Muslim maid servant, Munnibee who cooks for him. Though Masterji doesn't believe in cast differentiation but he doesn't let Mukul marry to his niece, Parvati on the basis of cast only.

Master Heeranand Joshi marries Parvati to Lalit because he is a Brahmin like parvati and their gotras matched. He becomes a little senile towards the end, senile and very bitter. He becomes obsessed by food, and always complains about his nephew Pooran's wife, Neera's cooking. Mukul's letters are the only thing he lives for:

'Your letters and his dinner. Each day has become like a mountain, he would complain. He would wait for the postman all morning. No one else ever wrote to him. "Only Mukul Nainwal didn't let me down," he would always say. "Only Mukul Nainwal." You were successful by his standards. You had not betrayed your promise,' Pooran said to me, almost accusingly. (HLS 98)

To put it briefly, it can be said that *A Himalayan Love Story*, brings to light numerous themes which are mentioned above. Namita Gokhale has depicted glimpses of the rigid system of marriage in India which is decided not on the basis of compatibility but on caste, religion, and dowry. She deals with the inner world of women in her novels and portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. Basically she writes about the situation of women and their failure in the fast-changing socio-economic milieu of India. She writes about the conflicts between tradition and modernity in this novel. Parvati is the centre of the novel. Her desires, efforts, and failures are the main points in this novel. The present novel reveals how poignantly Parvati expresses the frustration and disappointment of women experience social and cultural oppression in the male-dominating society. The novel highlights the agony and trauma experienced by women in male-dominated and tradition- bounded society.

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