

# The Pragmatics of the Female Self: Exploring the Making of the Female Psyche in Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*

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## Abstract:

The contemporary writings concerning the portrayal of women's positions in the literary circle have shown quite an encouraging picture. Different writers have made strenuous efforts to depict a kind of equal emancipatory position for both the male and the female characters in literary fiction. When it comes to ascertaining the position of a female, it is, more often than not, a dominated by the males. However, present-day writings in general and Indian English writing, in particular, have portrayed the females on par with their counterparts. Namita Gokhale is a significant modern Indian English fiction writer who has established herself as one of the voices of the rising females in the literary circuit. Her notable fiction, *The Book of Shadows*, can easily be aligned with the representation of the so-called "liberating woman." The novel epitomized the inherent zeal of the central character, Rachita, to lead her life in the most colorful manner possible by not letting the pain and sufferings deter her. Gokhale portrays the character of Rachita to be one of strength and vitality whose will-power to lead her life fruitfully makes her stand out tall amidst all odds shrouding her life. This paper, by focussing on the critical idea of the development of the female psyche, attempts to explore the construction of the self of the central female character in the novel. In this process, the paper also uses specific key ideas related to the theory of the unconscious mind of psychoanalysis in general. The entire research is purely qualitative and specifically focuses on the theoretical analysis of the novel's plot.

**Keywords:** emancipatory, female, Indian English writing, identity, psyche

The present-day Indian English writers have extensively focussed on the depiction of the emerging scenario of the females in literary fiction. It can be

stated that women today, no longer seem to be relegated and have made giant strides in the broader canvas of literature. Considering the current fictional pieces, we find numerous instances of women breaking the shackles of male domination and asserting their identity in society. This portrayal simultaneously showcases the changing picture of Indian English writing, which generally deals with a voice associated with freedom and liberation. Writers like Namita Gokhale have made giant leaps in this context to portray females to be both assertive and bold at the same time. Novels like *Paro: Dream of Passion, A Himalayan Love story* by Gokhale testify to the fact that her female characters epitomize what can be called the development of "new women" who are liberating in spirit, steadfast in their zeal, and bold when it comes to decision-making. Thus, it becomes vividly evident that the general picture of the subordination of the females is slowly waning away, which is paving the way for the advent of female characters who are equal to their male characters. The portrayal of the female characters to be quite assertive by Gokhale powerfully echoes the opinions of J.S. Mill, who always stressed that women could carve out a path for themselves with their inherent zeal. According to him,

... It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man. They convert what was a physical fact into a legal right ... Instead of the irregular and lawless conflict of physical strength. Those who had already been compelled to obedience became, in this manner, legally bound to it (Mill 372).

*The Book of Shadows*, at first glance, appears to be the tale of a lady called Rachita Tiwari, who

can also be considered to be Namita Gokhale herself. In a nutshell, the novel becomes the tale of Gokhale to some extent. The primary connection between Gokhale and the central character is related to the emergence of both ladies as powerful individuals inclined towards their ancestral places of living. Gokhale portrays Rachita as having survived a brutal acid attack and has also had the misfortune of losing her loved one. Moreover, the readers cannot but feel pity for her as it was a trauma which has adorned her life, thereby relegating her mental state to a secondary position. The portrayal of the ancestral home of Rachita by Gokhale to be a notable factor of serenity and solace is a significant aspect in relation to overcoming her troubled past. As she utters, "I have come to the hills to heal, to hide, to forget. To forgive, to be forgiven. My friends resisted my decision... but I knew that I needed solitude and soliloquy to come to terms with what had happened" (Gokhale 6). Gokhale portrays Rachita as an individual who has immense zeal to overcome all the difficulties that come her way, and this is how she paints the broader canvas of the novel.

Gokhale, in order to showcase the perturbing life of Rachita, depicts that she becomes a victim of an acid attack by the sister of her so-called fiancé, Anand, who, as it was seen, has committed suicide because of her. This heinous act by the sister of Anand marks the advent of mental and emotional trauma in the life of Rachita, who had to cope with the mental trauma. In such a state, it was the childhood home, which was located at Ranikhet, that appeared to be the object of mental peace. It was observed that Rachita resorted to this home so that she could escape the emotional pain, which was far greater than the visible physical assault. It was the picturesque and the enticing lush-green surrounding of the house that had a greater impact on the mind of Rachita, thereby helping her heal. Gokhale vividly indicates that Rachita witnessed numerous changes in the house, which had a deep impact on the improvement of her personality. In this way, Gokhale shows that Rachita could finally overcome her pain, and she structures a new world for herself. What was really heartening for the readers was the realization in the mind of Rachita that the sorrow which has been tormenting her life was a temporary one and the reality of human life is utter different. In her words,

The world outside is full of change, and I do not know if these memories can endure. This hillside

will remain, as will the Snow Mountains that watch over us, even if nothing else does. The garden will bloom again, the roses by the veranda, the weeds, and the forget-me-nots by the gravel path. I think I know that I will remain. (Gokhale 232)

The sense of pride in discovering the self is one of the integral aspects of the life of Rachita, which Gokhale depicts in the novel. This very inherent zeal plays a pivotal role in the discovery of the individual identity of Rachita in the novel by keeping the assaults—both mental and physical, aside. According to the famous thinker Betty Friedan, "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way" (12). This is exactly the representation we find in the character of Rachita in the novel. Her character greatly becomes the reflection of the arguments by Mill as well as he says,

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. It ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Pankhurst 97)

The very act of Rachita not come out to the world after the brutal acid attack and keep her confined within the four walls of the room is a significant portrayal of the inner angst of the character. This initial apprehension of not facing the world gave way to empowerment towards the end when she mustered courage in order to face the world again. Gokhale portrays her to be a lady with enormous willpower and mental courage as it was seen that she decided to lead her life productively by not letting the trauma of her past perturb her in the present. She remarks, "I could surely face the world again and stand again with my same face... my eyes still smart only when I am angry and extremely irritated" (Gokhale 33). The improvement in her state of mind and also her position as an individual as a result of her decision to lead her life productively could be vindicated by her own words, "I felt disquietingly alive. My repertoire of memory had run out: I had acquired, achieved, possessed myself again" (Gokhale 34)

The attributes related to critical female psychoanalytic studies have paid enormous attention to the female body. There have been numerous studies that have been carried out with the concerns related to the female body. The modern-day critical studies associated with the female psychoanalytical studies have gathered tremendous currency as "certain psychoanalytic literary readings – feminist, antiracist, queer [are]...joined by a common, continuing desire: that of evading the already read, the already known...To engage with the impossibility of reading, that is to say, to reread" (Weed 278-279). The portrayal of the psyche of Rachita by Gokhale in the novel needs critical address as she has been shown to be a marginalized being for most part of the novel which has been the victim of the hatred of her in-laws. The pain which Rachita had to experience in her life was portrayed by Gokhale in an almost ambiguous manner because the reason for the death of her lover, Anand, was also concealed under a layer of mystery. It was seen in the novel that her lover heard of an affair carried out by her, a fact which he could not fathom and resultantly decided to end his life. However, as it was seen later, there is no such evidence for this staggering claim in the novel, and thus, the authenticity of the fact was always an unsolved question in the novel.

This, Gokhale makes the readers critically introspect that the females generally come under the radar of some kind of doubt and suspicion without necessarily getting their allegations and claims proved or verified. Thus, Rachita had to become the victim of an acid attack without even finding out the authenticity of the case of her affair with Anand. Gokhale portrays that along with the death of Anand, there was the death of the peace and tranquillity in the life of Rachita as well, and this was the primary reason which made her shift her location to her childhood home. Thus, the reality was completely different. Coping was a tedious task for Rachita. In such a situation of trauma, her home in the hilly areas in Ranikhet acted as a physical space providing her with the required sense of calm and serenity. The character of Rachita, in this way, gets portrayed in the same line with the branch of psychology as "subjects, actors, and agents in the history of psychology" (Unger 3).

According to Dafermos, the psyche is nothing but "property of the most highly organized forms of matter that emerged and was transformed in

a long natural and cultural history. The 'psyche' constitutes of a specific kind of active reflection and orientation of the subjects in the world" (1529-1530). In the case of Rachita, her emotional state of mind and her psyche were put on the same plane by Gokhale because her psyche was very well getting materialized and functioned by the external acts of her family members, which victimised her. The acid attack by the sister of her lover, Anand, can easily be considered a body blow to both her physical appearance and also her psychic appearance of the body. Moreover, Gokhale also portrays that their cruel act of killing Anand also had a severe impact on his emotional state of Rachita. Thus, there was a direct effect of the act of killing by Anand on his mind of Rachita. She states, "In my case, all the parameters have changed. I can feel the doors to self-knowledge banging shut upon me. Even the face I might meet in the mirror is no longer mine. (Gokhale 3)

The basic structure of the theory of psychoanalysis developed by the stalwart himself, Sigmund Freud, argued that it is mainly the product of three important structures, 'id,' 'ego,' and 'super-ego' (Freud 24-29). Also another chief feature of this theory, as opined by Freud, is that there is always an aspect of unconsciousness which is very much present in human beings. Their inherent troubled state of their mind of Rachita comes out to the forefront at her childhood home in the hills as it was nothing but the gloomy shadow of loneliness that engulfed her amidst the hills. The act of reading various previously read and also unread stuff by Rachita as portrayed by Gokhale, appeared to have a lot of positive effects on her mind as she started observing the numerous tangible and also intangible changes which spin a web around human lives. The unconscious psychoanalytic dimensions of Rachita become portrayed with her numerous to and fro journeys of the mind into the mysterious lands comprising nothing but fancy and imaginative thoughts. On the flip side, it can easily be deciphered from this act of Rachita that through her mental journey, she was uncovering the otherwise repressed desires of her sub-conscious section of the mind. The haunting memory in the mind of Rachita becomes very much evident when she says, "My face had been banished from memory. Even in the bathroom, they had taped up the mirror so that all I could see when I brushed my teeth in the mornings" (Gokhale 33).

"Unconsciousness may be perceived as entirely composed of, or at least as including some ideas that were not originally conscious but that could become conscious" (Sears 43). This statement appears to be of immense significance in the context of the life of Rachita because she has been the victim of immeasurable stress and pain. In such a case, the trauma in the life of Rachita becomes even more explicit as her unconscious journey echoes the principles of the unconscious human brain cited in *The Principle of Psychology* by William James. The idea of "id" can be understood about a particular wish of a human being. Whenever an individual desires to procure something, it falls under the id category. The "super-ego" concerns itself with the different activities and events which torment a person externally. It can include all positive and negative results and experiences of human beings. The "ego" becomes the connecting link between the other two components, and it signifies the reality of individuals. Thus, it is a reflection of the psyche of an individual, which focusses on the external reality and happening of an individual to a great extent. The following lines become a full validation of this very idea.

The ego is not identical to the totality of my psyche, being merely one complex among other complexes...ego is only the subject of my consciousness, while the self is the subject of my total psyche, which also includes the unconscious. In this sense, the self would be an ideal entity that embraces the ego. (Fordham et al., 3048)

Gokhale portrays Rachita after the acid attack to be a very different lady, with her starting to almost hate herself physically. As much as was the hate in the mind of Rachita for her distorted face that, as we find out, she even stopped looking at herself in any kind of glass. It was hate and dislike for her own body that started to strengthen her mind's roots. However, what was encouraging was that Gokhale portrays her as a strong character who was neither feeble like her lover Anand nor insensitive like him. It was firm determination and grit that positively regulated her life after the unforgettable incident in her life. "The deep disturbances in my self-image, my body ego, the sense of depersonalization that was dogging me simply vanished. I looked in the mirror and saw myself" (Gokhale 21). Gokhale depicts the aspect of light to be playing a significant part in her life as it was seen that she was constantly hankering after tit, and it was dawn which appeared to be

endearing to her. The brutality of the acid attack seems to have a deep impact on her as it was seen that Gokhale portrays her to have been traumatized by the act even when she sleeps. She remarks,

I know that if I close my eyes, I will see Anand's sister's face, contorted by an expression beyond anger, hate, or spirit. I keep my eyes open to shut out the image of her face from my mind: it tends to float up in my interminable hours of half-sleep. (Gokhale 20)

The ramifications of the psychological repressions of Rachita also found glaring manifestation in her expression that the real face she possessed was very much different from the present shattered face. According to Parnas et al., "When staring with his own mirror or some other specular representation (e.g., in shop glass windows), or portraiture photos and artworks, he has a sensation of not knowing who is who or where they are" (18). Gokhale makes Rachita self-introspect significantly regarding her present state, and this is where the intricacy of light becomes of paramount importance. It was light, which she believed, would render her life meaningful in terms of improving it. This also, alongside her search for solace, helped her re-create a world of her own choice. The imaginary world that Rachita created in her mind appeared to be far better for her than the real world as the people there never left her alone like her lover who left her in the real world. She states,

There is a young girl in my memories, and I saw her again last night when I could not keep my eyes open. I sit at the window, gazing at the mountains, the pine, and the oak surrounding us. Filling up these notebooks, listening to Lohaniju's stories, watching the day turn to dusk, awaiting the dawn. (Gokhale 18)

All told, *The Books of Shadows* can easily be considered one of the strongest portrayals of the rise of female characters against all odds by Gokhale. The character of Rachita stands tall, captivantly to assert her position and carve out a happy world for herself, albeit imaginary, after the umpteen trauma and relegations which she had to endure in the real world. Gokhale, through the character of Rachita, uncovers the emerging scenario of the rise of females in the modern-day Indian English fiction. Rachita, by her endeavors to structure a comfortable space for

herself, succeeds significantly, and herein lies the artistic truth of this literary delight by Gokhale.

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