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Unraveling the Past Mythology and Historical Memory in Indian English

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Abstract

This is what contemporary Indian English literature does: it questions the past to find meaning in a disjointed present. Authors such as Namita Gokhale and Amitav Ghosh show that history and mythology are not just lifeless archives or inert writings. Rather they are living creatures who consciously create personal identities and define society's norms. In reclaiming the myths of the past, these writers are questioning the boundaries and limitations of nation-states, and revealing the unrecorded traumas of official histories, they demonstrate that to remember is to survive, to resist.

Keywords: integral part of life, society's norms, unrecorded traumas, modern moral and social rules

Introduction

In Indian culture, mythology forms an integral part of life, and Namita Gokhale is no exception to it. It is this matrix of the great epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana that most Indians know intimately and shape their modern moral and social rules. Namita Gokhale inhabits this place actively, coming up with ways to re-invent these ancient texts through the lens of modernity, and by giving voice to the marginalised, including women. In *Search of Sita* is a massive reexamination of this mythological character of Sita that Gokhale, co-editor with Malashri Lal, is undertaking in the anthology. Although Sita is one of the central characters of Indian womanhood, there is no one unique version that explains her story. In regionalized versions she becomes humanized; she is deified in the canonical versions. Gokhale brings to the fore the issue of Sita's birth, her days in exile, her abduction, the test by fire and its eventual result, Sita's return on earth, to question the idea of unconditional women's submission in the patriarchal structure. She examines new interpretations of this enigmatic figure, revealing her indelible influence in our daily lives.

Gokhale has completely upended the famous Sanskrit play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, by Kalidasa, in her ground-breaking novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. In the traditional myth *Shakuntala's* character is often considered as a passive victim of fate. But, Gokhale's *Shakuntala* is a woman with a will of her own that can't be dominated by social norms. Treated as a prisoner, and starving for adventure, she willingly leaves her home, her family, and produces a long journey with a Greek horse merchant called Nearchus. In doing so, she completely crosses and transcends the limits of feminine actions and becomes "Yaduri!", the fallen woman, and completely appropriates her body, her desires and her destiny. Gokhale's cornerstone of Indian historical literature is also a bold declaration of emancipation for women. Moreover, Gokhale reinterprets Mahabharata and Hindu theology emphasizing human nature and vulnerability. In *The Puffin Mahabharata*, she uncovers the epic for young readers, and reveals that it is as much about defeat as it is about victory, and about humility as it is about

bravery. In her young adult novel, *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions*, she takes a boy named Chintamani Dev Gupta from today's time and places him in the days of the Mahabharata, through a wormhole. Here he comes across Ghatotkacha and his mother, Hidimba. Gokhale makes the demon-giant Ghatotkacha, who is typically overlooked in other accounts, a benign force for protecting the forest, using the power of the Rakshasa technology and ancient secrets for the benefit of all. In addition, she addresses issues of supreme theology in *The Book of Shiva*, exploring the divinity as Ardhanarishwara (half-man, half-woman) and Neelakantha (the half-human god that drank poison to save the worlds). In the process she discovers a philosophy, that which is frightening and yet so life affirming.

The Shadow Lines, by Amitav Ghosh, confronts the huge historical traumas of colonialism, partition and the nation-state while Gokhale clears away the tangled and complex mythologies. Ghosh challenges head-on the idea of the nation as a unique, concrete entity, by, for example, asserting that the lines which delineate the boundaries of nations are only "shadow lines". These lines have been drawn by politicians and communities of people with the same culture, memory, and history have been violently split from each other.,,,

The discourse on imagination, history and reality is through the two main characters, the narrator's grandmother Tha'mma and his uncle Tridib. The forceful militant expression of traditional nationalism is represented by Tha'mma. She was born in the era of the independence movement and hence has a strong conviction that real countries are created by wars and bloodshed. She claims that she has earned a right to the place she is standing with her brother's blood and her father's blood and her son's blood, and thus a country is only real if people have earned the right to be there with their blood, their father's blood, their son's blood. But when she returns to her birthplace of Dhaka, her staunch belief in boundaries is utterly broken. She can't imagine that they have no boundary, and ask, "If there is no boundary between two sides, how can they be different?" The fragility of borders is further ridiculed by her uncle Jethamoshai who won't leave his ancestral house as he thinks there is no such thing as "this India-Shindia" and suggests the idiocy of relocating a house when the politicians may want to draw another line somewhere down the road.

Brazenly different from Tha'mma is Tridib, who thinks there are no divides to cross, just the untying freedom of imagination. The young narrator learns from Tridib that only a pure and painful and primitive desire can let one know the world. This strong imagination takes one outside the scope of the mind to other time, other places, and makes it clear that historical and geographical boundaries are figments of imagination with which human empathy can challenge. In the process of Tridib's teachings, the narrator discovers that Muslim Dhaka and Hindu Calcutta are, in essence, "mirror images," with the only difference being a 'looking-glass border' that has forced them into an irrevocable symmetry.

Ghosh also uses the novel to reveal the great inconsistencies that exist in official history. The narrator sets out to find out what really happened when the man was killed in a mob riot in Dhaka. He learns that almost no mention is made of this devastating event, which forever changed his family, in the newspapers or public records of the time. In personalizing the memory of the event, Ghosh draws attention to the "silence of voiceless events" and

demonstrates that personal, mnemonic history can be much more than a "deceptively simple" sanitised version of what the State's official history has decided to say about it,

Conclusion: Synthesizing Myth and Memory The literary works of Namita Gokhale and Amitav Ghosh show how much exploring the past is a revolutionary act. History and mythology are often deployed as a way to draw lines, legitimate violence and submission when left to orthodox authorities or the state alone,,. The writers, however, by putting the personal memory on the weight of their narration, humanizing the ancient epics, and revealing the artificiality of the political boundaries, reclaim the past for the marginalized,,,. In the case of *Shakuntala*, it is the defiant unpacking of the past from an ancient manuscript to claim her freedom, and in the case of *The Shadow Lines*, it is the narrator's unearthing of the truth and history of a forgotten riot. They defy the boundaries of imagination, history, and reality and provide a potent and renewed vision for modernity's identity, a vision that finally does justice to the complexities of human nature.

In Indian English literature, ancient mythology and modern historical memory exist in a fascinating intersection within the powerful narratorship of the literary field. In Indian English literature, ancient mythology and modern historical memory are in a fascinating intersection within the powerful narratorship of the literary field. Authors are not content to let the past remain untouched and buried in dusty archives. They revitalize old legends and historical traumas, they try to be repressed, to explain the cracked realities of today's society. The careful elaboration of sacred epics and the bold challenging of national boundaries create a different trajectory for the marginalized identities. It's this deep engagement with the past that makes memory more than a nostalgic device, but a radical weapon of survival and feminist emancipation.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh embarks on a monumental project that has to do with what he calls the "delusions of geometry", the artificiality of the geographical and hence of the nation-state. The novel deftly interweaves the private lives of both the Datta-Chaudhuri family in Bengal and Price family in London to show how public history has deeply affected each person's private identity. Ghosh embodies through the character of Tha'mma the extremely aggressive and militant traditional exclusionary nationalism. Tha'mma is a true believer born in the hot times of the Indian independence movement who feels that a true nation could only come into being with lots of blood and all-out warfare. She boldly claims that a country is not a country until the people are given their land, and that the land can only be given to them when the blood of their brothers and sons has been spilt. But when she journeys back to her home country of Dhaka she is thrown into a tragedy, as she cannot escape the boundaries she had previously set. Her profound bewilderment comes when she gets to know that the border between India and East Pakistan is nonexistent at all. She says, "How could two sides be different if there were not a physical line between them? Her old-fashioned uncle Jethamoshai, who will not budge from his family house in Dhaka, derides the idea of boundaries even further. He rejects the political divide, saying that he does not believe that "this India-Shindia" exists, and that it is totally absurd to move somewhere else, as politicians call for a line to be drawn somewhere else the next day.

But against the backdrop of the character of Tha'mma, her nephew Tridib provides the intellectual ballast for the voiceless child narrator. The free imagination of human beings transcends even the physical boundaries, which is the fundamental basic fact that Tridib believes. The young narrator is taught to know that true knowledge of the world depends on a pure and primitive desire which takes the mind much further than at present to other times and other places. That historical and geographical boundaries are just intangible lines that can be easily crossed through the strength of empathy and cross-cultural understanding is effectively demonstrated by Tridib. Moreover, Ghosh uses the story to question the vast lacunae in official history. As the narrator sets out to discover the truth about the circumstances of Tridib's death, which took place amidst a violent communal riot in Dhaka, he is astonished to see that hardly any notice was taken of it in the public newspapers of the time. Ghosh has meticulously recreated this tragedy using personal mnemonic history, thus giving a strong voice to the "silence of voiceless events". He makes a strong case for the value of personal memory over the state-sponsored, sanitised, highly selective versions of history that are available.

Namita Gokhale and the Subversion of Hindu Epics: Emotions of horror are the subject of both trauma, but in one Ghosh deals with the pain of contemporary political happenings and in the other Namita Gokhale uses her sharp mind to dissect ancient mythological tracts that govern Indian moral codes. Indian culture places great regard on the epic stories like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which are not old-fashioned tales but living paradigms that constantly influence society's expectations. Gokhale intrudes into this hallowed space in a bid to liberate the voices of women and the marginalised. Gokhale begins a large scale re-evaluation of Sita in the anthology, *In Search of Sita*, co-edited with Malashri Lal. Sita has been one of the most significant icons of Indian womanhood but her canonisation to obtain absolute surrender of woman has also been a traditional requirement. Gokhale is able to open the vehement debate on her birth, her traumatic days in exile, her abduction and her eventual descent to earth – to defy the patriarchy of the epic. She delves into the newly discovered regional interpretations, which paint a picture of Sita as a person beyond her role as the passive victim and as the icon of female strength and resilience.

In her novella, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, Gokhale engages in a similar kind of feminist revisionism. The famous Sanskrit play, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, by great poet Kalidasa is completely subverted by the text. Traditionally, Shakuntala is always depicted as a helpless and tragic victim whose fate is thrust upon her and whom she accepts with quiet stoicism. This, however, is shattered by Gokhale who has breathed new life into the character of Shakuntala who is an independent and imaginative woman who very forcefully resists being suffocated by the suffocating social norms. Shakuntala is brought up all the time ignored in favour of her brother, and longs for the education that is exclusive to the boys. She marries a man named Srijan, older than her, and he is an unfaithful husband, who brings a handmaiden home; Shakuntala feels a sudden, tremendous and transforming anger. With a desire to see the world and experience all it had to offer, she makes a daring choice to leave her comfortable home and to travel on a long journey with a Greek horse merchant named Nearchus. Through her conscious decision to exceed the norm of women's behavior, she adopts the role of a fallen

woman, Yaduri. This is a transgressive act in which she proclaims unapologetic and absolute ownership over her body, over her destiny. She later comes to pass away in the holy city of Kashi with a longing to see her dear mountains, but her journey is a strong declaration for the emancipation of women.

Gokhale's humanizing gesture is extended to the Mahabharata as well. She masterfully connects the dots between ancient puzzles and current times in her captivating novel for young readers, *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions*. A contemporary boy, Chintamani Dev Gupta, is teleported back in time to the epic tale where he encounters demon-giant Ghatotkacha. Gokhale reimagines Ghatotkacha as a benevolent and wise guardian of the forest, who speaks several ancient languages. In *The Puffin Mahabharata*, she also recalls readers that the epic is as much about losing as it is about winning – and about immense humility as it is about great courage. In *The Book of Shiva* she uncovers the terrifying - and life-affirming - philosophy of the Supreme Ascetic, half man and half woman god. In Gokhale's reinterpretation, the intricacies of human nature are given a strong presence in the stories of the gods.

Gokhale's work in the Himalayan trilogy explores in detail the haunting legacy of the British colonial period, beyond ancient mythology. In *Things to Leave Behind*, she carefully and comprehensively documents the sweeping changes in the society that occurred in the Kumaon region of India in the mid-nineteenth century. The story unfolds in 1856 and the conflict between tradition and the tenuous survival of modernity under British rule is the stuff of drama. Gokhale is not a romanticist, but rather one who brings the powerful and simple mix-up of caste, creed, and culture to the fore. The novel vividly charts the unrecorded domestic struggles of native women under the Raj, through the incredibly feisty character of Tilottama Dutt, who faces a massive opposition to her decision of boldly hire a pundit to teach her how to read and write. It is a story of the nation which is retold not only by the British generals but by the indomitable spirit of women of Kumaon.

Within *The Book of Shadows*, one might say at its breaking point, is the suffocating envelope of historical memory. After suffering a horrific acid attack which marred her face, the protagonist Rachita Tiwari takes a place in a remote house located in the Himalayas for a century. Here, in this remote and scenic paradise, Rachita stumbles upon the colonial past's journals and diaries. She reads about the agonies of one of the British missionaries, William Cockerell, and see the ghostly appearances of Captain Wolcott and his mistress Dona Rosa. The house is steeped with the shadows and dead passions of the long dead; and here is evident the indelible mark of historical violence on the physical landscape. Rachita articulates very well that the past has an incredibly tenacious clench on the future, and often tyrannises the future into repetitive and destructive patterns. She knows that she had come to the hills to wipe away her past, but she can't seem to get rid of history.

Rachita comes to a realization of the brutal truth about human nature throughout the ages, however; by engaging with these historical ghosts and coming to grips with the harsh truths of human nature over the centuries, she is able to piece her broken psyche back together. She eventually discovers the important truth that sanity needs to be reasserted and rejuvenated all

the time. She knows that humans are the only ones who can write their own stories and that they cannot be passive recipients of historical trauma. She takes the decision to gamble the dice, to try again, to cast and recast, to change her lot in every precious minute, boldly, and sees her haunted isolation as a deep experience of spiritual rebirth.

However, to get a proper idea of the importance of historical memory in Indian English literature one should also consider monumental works of Khushwant Singh. The political history of India is raw and unvarnished brutality in Singh's hands and the psychological and mythical side in Ghosh and Gokhale's. His epic movie *Train to Pakistan* is a classic account of Partition, the catastrophic event of 1947 and the beginning of Partition in the subcontinent that claimed the lives of more than a million people. The novel is obliquely set in the fictional town of Mano Majra on the border, and relentlessly shows how ordinary citizens quickly turned into ruthless killers because of the communal hatred which spread like toxic flu. Singh dispels all the rose-tinted fantasies of the freedom movement and makes the reader look head on at the gruesome massacres on the blood trains which moved across the new border. Singh has a deeply humanising perspective of the vast national tragedy by evoking the local parasites of Partition who pillaged with joy, as well as the unexpected heroism of local outlaw Jugga.

Singh's grandiose and sprawling *Delhi: A Novel* is a veritable literary brickwork of the many-paved past of the Indian capital. The novel is an impassioned one that decries a long series of murders and betrayals over the years which have besmirched the city. The story follows the cynical middle aged Sikh Journalist, a freelance pundit and a somewhat underhanded tourist guide for visiting foreign diplomats such as Lady Jane Hoity-Toity. Despite his deeply flawed and highly observant protagonist, Singh delves into the ghost of Delhi, and gives respect to both the faceless people in unmarked graves, and those buried in beautiful stone mausoleums. The novel openly champions the strength of the city and its inhabitants, calling on readers to embrace the brutal reality of conquests past without sacrificing their *joie de vivre*. Through this writing, Singh has been able to show that it is important to remember the grim reality of the past, if it is essential to understand the modern democratic development of the nation.

Often the historical memory is unraveled along with the aggressive subversion of the colonial language as well. Linguistic rebellion is used by writers to be able to mock the history chronicles of conquerors. Arundhati Roy's fiction is a brilliant countering of the tragic weight of history with the carnivalesque and extensive linguistic transgression. The Anglophile attitude of the dominant classes is mercilessly mocked. Postcolonial elites use the English language as a means to demand submission, while the marginalized characters resist this grammar and syntax by subverting them. The application of nonsense rhymes and phonetic play and the effective use of regional languages lead to a total breakdown of the threatening force of the colonial historical narrative.

These authors give the subaltern a voice and they are not afraid of it; a voice powerful in its own articulation, linked to the very language which records official history, and thus fractures it. Moreover, the never abstract nature of historical forces is stressed by the "Big God" of history repeatedly being exposed by the historically intimate tragedies of the "Small God". They are active and do so by means of police brutality and caste discrimination as well as by

the choking regulations of the domestic sphere. The past is a life force that always threatens to crush the vulnerable and historical and linguistic resistance is a literal survival.

Conclusions

Mythology and historical memory in contemporary Indian English literature are a cultural rebellion of great magnitude and urgency. Today, the authors like Namita Gokhale unflinchingly enter the realms of sacred texts such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata and break the illusion of superiority of males and inferiority of females. Gokhale's characters, such as Shakuntala, thus playfully and forcefully escape from the ancient myth to be used as a blueprint for modern emancipation of women. In the same way, Amitav Ghosh questions the precarious, often bloody, boundaries of nations with such persistent scrutiny that the strict lines on maps created by politicians can be easily crossed by the unarmed force of human empathy and imagination. Drawing inspiration from the bloody soil of Delhi, and the agonizing reality of partition, Khushwant Singh insists that we be absolutely honest about the nation's bloody beginnings. These are all brilliant stories together that utterly subvert official, officialistic and state narratives of history. These authors succeed in recuperating the past for the marginalised by using personal memory, uncovering the ghosts of colonialism and recasting the destiny of mythological heroines. They argue vociferously that history must be fearlessly unraveled and continually challenged. In doing so, they defy and transcend boundaries of imagination, history and reality, providing a vision for the future that is monumentally powerful and restorative in Indian terms.

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