

READING OF NAMITA GOKHALE'S SHAKUNTALA THE PLAY OF MEMORY TO UNDERSTAND THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA AND THE STRUGGLE OF BRAHMINICAL PATRIARCHY TO RETAIN ITS CASTE AND GENDER BASED HIERARCHY THROUGH VEDIC RELIGION

Dr. Savita Patil, Jaishree Premkumar

Professor and Head
Dept. of English Elphinstone College, Mumbai
(savitapatil@elphinstone@ac.in)

Ph. D. Research Scholar,
Mumbai University
(jainti2001@yahoo.com)

Abstract

The early medieval India is historically known to be the period of intense religious unrest because the religious landscape of India went through major changes during this era. This was the time when brahminically cultured Vedic religion was facing a tough challenge not just from heterodox religions such as Jainism and especially Buddhism but also from within its own religion in the form of Shakti cult and Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya. Shakti cult with its belief in female aspect of divinity as the supreme power challenged brahminical cultured gender hierarchy and Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta philosophical school of thought treated ritualistic part of the Vedas as lower knowledge and therefore changed the focus of Vedic religion from karma kanda to jnana kanda in order to attain knowledge of the supreme spirit. Namita Gokhale's novel Shakuntala The Play of Memory which re-visions Kalidasa's Abhijana Shakuntalam is set in this religiously tumultuous era. This paper attempts to read Gokhale's revisionary novel to understand the religious landscape of early medieval India and the struggle of brahminical patriarchy to retain its caste and gender based hierarchy through Vedic religion against the growing popularity of Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Shaktism and Vaishnavism as has been portrayed by Gokhale in her revisionary novel.

Keywords: Vedic religion, brahminical patriarchy, Advaita Vedanta, early medieval India, self, hegemony

INTRODUCTION OF NOVEL

Shakuntala The Play of Memory written in 2005 by Namita Gokhale re-visions Kalidasa's *Abhijana Shakuntalam* by using the theme of memory and desire of Shakuntala, the chief character of Gokhale's revisionary novel. Gokhale chooses eighth century medieval India as the historical setting of her revisionary novel and shows her feisty and free-spirited Shakuntala's journey towards fulfilling the desire of her "self" against the backdrop of this religiously turbulent early medieval India. Gokhale's novel thus can be analyzed from two different levels: at one level it could be the read to analyze Shakuntala, the chief protagonist of Gokhale's novel to understand her struggle to fulfil the desire of her "self" by resisting the caste and gender based brahminical patriarchy and at the other level it could be read to analyze religious landscape of early medieval India to understand the struggle of brahminical patriarchy to retain its caste and gender based hierarchy through Vedic religion against the growing popularity of Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Shakti cult and Vaishnavism. This paper attempts to analyze Gokhale's novel from the second level, i.e., to read Gokhale's novel to understand the religious landscape of India during early medieval India and struggle of brahminical patriarchy to retain its class and gender based hierarchy through Vedic religion.

BRAHMINICALLY DOMINATED VEDIC RELIGION THROUGH CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF SHAKUNTALA

Gokhale's Shakuntala begins her first person narrative by telling her readers "I grew up in mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic"(8). After describing harsh life of vanvasis, dwellers of the forest, Shakuntala lets her readers know about the prevalent religious situation by telling them about Guresvara, her older brother: Govinda, whom I can now remember as anyone other than Guresvara only with an effort was everything I was not....Born a Brahmin, descended from the Sapta-rishis, the seven sky-born sages, he was certain that the gods cherished him and acted and interceded on his advice. Constant as the North star, the Dhruva-tara, his deeds and desires moved unerringly only in one direction, to save and preserve the ways of his forefathers. These were troubled times for Brahmins everywhere. Govinda, parroting the gaunt temple priest who was his first guru, said that the deceitful faith of the Buddha has usurped the true path of the ancient religion. Disorder reigned, and kings, merchants, common folk all were overcome by the false piety of the new ways. Or so my brother claimed.(11)

Through her narrative Shakuntala thus lets her readers understand that during her childhood Buddhism had become a major threat to the hegemony of brahminically cultured Vedic religion. It is important to note here that this was time when priestly class had become the most dominant class in the society because all religious ceremonies and rites could be performed only by the priests. Further, not just common folks but even kings exercised their authority after seeking religious sanction of priests. According to Gokhale's Shakuntala the rigidity of brahminically cultured Vedic religion in terms of its elaborate rituals and caste hierarchy slowly made people turn to Buddhism which was much more liberal when it came to varna/caste hierarchy and ritualistic yajnas. Shakuntala thus tells her readers "I saw no error in disorder, it seemed to be the natural condition of life"(11). K Damodaran too in his book *Indian Thought A Critical Survey* while writing about the growing popularity of Buddhism among people from all strata of society during early medieval India suggests, "Buddhism was anti-priest in its outlook and opposed to ritualism, and hence it was found to be more advantageous for the new times than Brahminism with its accent on the Varnasrama inequalities and the privileged position of the priests"(108).

ADI SHANKARACHARYA'S ADVAITA VEDANTA AS SAVIOUR OF BRAHMINICALLY CULTURED VEDIC RELIGION

After making her readers understand the growing influence of Buddhism on people belonging to all strata of the society Gokhale's Shakuntala lets its readers know about Adi Shankaracharya, the eighth century philosopher who with his Advaita Vedanta philosophy was successfully challenging all other religions including Buddhism and thus had proved himself to be the most revered monk of India at that time. It is pertinent to note here that before the arrival of Shankaracharya on religious landscape of India the brahminically cultured Vedic religion was completely focused on elaborate rituals and yajnas to propitiate various gods in order to win their favour. Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta philosophy was against this ritualistic tradition of ancient Vedic religion and instead was completely focused on knowledge of "self" or "Brahman". According to Shankaracharya karmakanda part of Vedas which dealt with sacrificial injunction "was intended for ordinary people who were anxious for this or that pleasure, and were never actuated by any desire of knowing the absolute truth, but the Upanishads, which were intended for the wise who had controlled their senses and become disinclined to all earthly joys, demonstrated the one Absolute, Unchangeable, Brahman as the only Truth of the universe"(Dasgupta *Vedanta Philosophy* 430-431). The Brahman that Shankara spoke about was "beyond all predicates and qualities (*nirguna*), but in its temporal mode as the Lord it has attributes (*saguna*), and so can be approached through devotion as an object of consciousness. To see the absolute as the Lord is to maintain a distinction between self and absolute, which is to retain a vestige of ignorance which must finally be transcended"(Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism* 242).

Gokhale's Shakuntala suggests that though Shankaracharya's Advaita philosophy with its belief in idealist monism was in complete contradiction with the ritualistic part of Vedic religion and thus existed as a distinct religious philosophical school, it was soon wholeheartedly accepted as part of Vedic religion by the then brahminical patriarchy primarily because it did not deny the authority of Vedas unlike Buddhism, Jainism, Charvaka and Ajivika philosophical schools of thought which rejected Vedic authority. Gokhale suggests that Shankaracharya, though unintentionally thus became a saviour of the then brahminical patriarchy to retain its hegemony through religion. This can be seen when Gokhale's Shakuntala tells her readers that her brother who was now known as Guresvara after his upanayana ceremony had attached himself to "guru Totakacharya, a favoured disciple of the most famous monk in India, the Shankaracharya"(28) in order to save the ancient Vedic religion. The impact and rigidity of Shankaracharya's idealist form of Vedic religion is reflected during the later part of the novel when Shakuntala, after getting to know about the pivotal role played by Mandana Misra's wife in the famous debate between Mandana Misra and Shankaracharya feels eager to join the Vedanta school of thought. Shakuntala however gets rebuked by the young Vedantins who condescendingly tell her "We

Vedantins are not like the accursed Buddhist orders, where anybody and everybody can become a Bhikku, even a woman!"(179).

REFUSAL TO ACCEPT WORSHIP OF FEMALE FORM OF DIVINITY BY BRAHMINICAL CULTURED VEDIC RELIGION

Gokhale's Shakuntala then lets her readers know that though Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta was wholeheartedly accepted as part of mainstream Vedic religion when it came to Shaktism or worship of feminized image of divinity which too was proving to be a major religious force was completely rejected by the then dominant brahmin patriarchy in spite of its acceptance of the Vedic authority. Shakuntala makes her readers understand how the worshippers of Shakti cult were treated by the then brahmin patriarchs by letting them know about an old woman from the forest:

Only last month, a goatherd had discovered the carcasses of two milch cows by the river. The villagers blamed the demoness who dwelt in the rock-caves near the cliff. The tigers did her bidding, as did owls and cats and other creatures of the night. This demoness hated the daily lives of ordinary people. Every year she took goats and cows and sometimes child from the village to make her own. Then the menfolk decided to teach her a lesson. They pulled her by the hair and stoned her when she was passing by the fields one day. They tore her clothes and spat on her face. She had not been around since, yet people were anxious about losing their animals. (32)

As a child even Shakuntala used to consider the old woman to be a rock demoness till she happened to meet her personally and realized that the so called rock demoness was a strong and assertive woman and was shunned by the villagers because with her independent spirit she had become a threat to the hegemony of brahminical patriarchy. Shakuntala recounts the incident when she met the old woman, the day when her monk brother came to visit them for the first time after his renunciation:

That afternoon I was in the kitchen, searching for a sesame ladduka, when I felt the blood trickling down my legs....Mother came in from the front room. When she saw me, her face hardened. She twisted my ear sharply with her rough fingers and yanked me out of the kitchen. 'Have you no modesty girl!' she hissed. 'Defiling the household fires when a holy man is visiting us! You are a woman now, you had better understand what that implies! She dragged me to the low stoop beside the cowshed, her injured foot only adding menace to her angry march.(31) .

In her excitement to be the perfect host to her son and his fellow companions Shakuntala's mother completely forgets about her young menstruating daughter. Not ready to accept her humiliation, in anger and protest young Shakuntala heads towards forest in the darkness of night and there for the first she sees the so called rock demoness of the forest. Shakuntala tells her readers that it was the old woman from forest who became her physical and emotional anchor by helping her to clean herself and later assuring her that her menstruation symbolized that she had been blessed. The old woman thus tells Shakuntala "I see the blood-goddess has begun her sacred visitations on your body"(34). After gaining Shakuntala's confidence the old woman who could see that Shakuntala too was as free-spirited as her, thinks it necessary that Shakuntala retains her free-spiritedness and therefore thinks it important to make her know about the female aspect of divinity which was kept at the fringes of the then Vedic religion. The old woman who was a devotee and secret custodian of the abandoned Sapta Matrika temple of the village thus tells Shakuntala "I will instruct you in the ways of the goddess. Sometimes you will meet her as Kalika, or Raudri with the blue skin and eyes as yellow as a cat, who is the dark mistress of the illusory world...Remember that "in every one of her forms the goddess is always Swamini, mistress of herself"(35). The old woman thus lets young Shakuntala about the feminized image of divinity which was discouraged by the then brahminical patriarchy because the goddess with her love for independence was seen as a threat to the gender role assigned to women as written in the law code of Manu which clearly stated "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence"(Manusmriti 56). The old woman also confides in Shakuntala that in spite of knowing well that she is a woman like all other women from that village, the villagers treat her like a demoness. Young Shakuntala thus realizes that the old woman had been turned into a demoness by the villagers because of her decision to be the follower of female image of divinity which was unacceptable for the then brahminically cultured patriarchy. Later in the novel when Shakuntala questions Guresvara on the abandoned Sapta Matrika temple though reluctantly, he confides in her

A great sage once came to these hills in the course of his travels. He slept the night near the temple and listened to the goddess-speak. He did not like what he heard, and so he had the temple boarded up. He recited some secret sutras and commanded the goddess to silent. Shakti without Shiva is not feasible, he declared. The men of the village were with him in his enterprise, for they too did not like the voice of the goddess. They said it made their women too assertive; it led to disorder, and disorder, you understand , sister, is never the true state(77-78).

In his role as the representative of brahminically indoctrinated Vedic religion Guresvara thus lets Shakuntala understand that Shakti cult could not be accepted as part of Vedic religion in spite of its acceptance of Vedic authority primarily because independent and assertive women posed threat to the dominance of brahminical

patriarchy. And the only solution that was found to stop power of the goddess by the then brahminical patriarchy was to board up and abandon the Matrika temple.

ATTEMPT OF BRAHMINICAL PATRIARCHY TO RETAIN ITS HEGEMONY THROUGH VAISHNAVISM

Gokhale's *Shakuntala* then tells her readers about Vaishnavism or Vishnu cult which believed in worship of Vishnu, the male form of divinity as the supreme being. Gokhale's novel suggests that Vaishnavism was easily absorbed as part of the mainstream Vedic religion because it disseminated the brahminically cultured gender role and also believed in authority of the Vedas. Vaishnavism as part of Vedic religion appears towards the end of the novel when Gokhale's *Shakuntala* after abandoning her home, her duplicitous husband and later her Greek lover reaches Kashi in her heavily pregnant state, the place she had desired to visit even as a child. *Shakuntala* describes to her readers how the Vyasa, a public reader of the sacred texts tried to make his audiences accept the hegemony of brahminical patriarchy:

'Explaining the mysteries of the Shastras is like uncovering the breasts of a mother,' he said. They must be well-guarded and protected, they can be revealed only to a devotee, a disciple, or an eldest son.'

...'Women and Shudras may listen to the Puranas from the mouth of a Brahmin,' the Vyasa continued, 'but they should never attempt to recite the Puranas themselves.'

He cleared his throat with a careless condescension, as though we mortals were obstructing it. Scanning the faces of his audience, he began. 'Know then that, for the born, death is certain, and for the dead, rebirth. The Supreme god, Vishnu protects the universe. By his command, Brahma creates the world; by his order, Shiva destroys it. Through Vishnu's will all beings take birth, in various wombs, human and animal, good and evil, fit and unfit....(183)

The Vyasa then proceeds to narrate a tale from *Devi Bhagavata Purana* and ends it by moralizing his audience "Do your duty. Fulfil your karma. Forsake the path of desire.'(185). Indeed, one can observe here that by taking recourse to religion the Vyasa was clearly trying to indoctrinate his audience into the caste and gender hierarchy of brahminical patriarchy and thus was easily absorbed as Puranic form of Vedic religion.

CONCLUSION

Gokhale's revisionary novel *Shakuntala The Play of Memory* skillfully brings alive the religious landscape of India during early medieval period and the struggle of brahminical patriarchy to retain its caste and gender based hierarchy through Vedic religion during this religiously turbulent historical period. As can be seen from the above analysis, the biggest challenge faced by the brahminically cultured Vedic religion came from Buddhism, the then growing religion among all strata of society and to counter this challenge the brahminical patriarchy adopted the strategy of being tactfully assimilative towards those religious sects and philosophies which accepted the authority of the Vedas and repudiated those which rejected the Vedic authority. Thus, Advaita Vedanta philosophical school of thought, in spite of its opposition to the ritualist part of Vedic religion was easily absorbed as part of the brahminically cultured Vedic religion because it accepted authority of the Vedas. Similarly, Vaishnavism too was readily absorbed as part of the brahminically cultured Vedic religion primarily because along with accepting authority of the Vedas Vaishnavism also believed in caste and gender hierarchy in religion. However, Shaktism, another strand of religious sect, though did not reject authority of the Vedas was repudiated by the brahminical patriarchy because it believed in the female of image of divinity as the supreme being and thus was seen as threat to the hegemony of caste and gender based brahminical patriarchy.

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