



NAMITA GOKHALE'S *PARO: DREAMS OF PASSION*: A STUDY OF GENDER, POWER AND FEMALE AGENCY

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Abstract

*Namita Gokhale occupies an important position in contemporary Indian English literature. Her fiction frequently explores women's experiences, identity, sexuality, relationships, social restrictions, and the conflict between individual freedom and traditional values. Her debut novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, published in 1984, attracted considerable attention for its unconventional representation of an urban Indian woman. The novel presents Paro as an independent, ambitious, attractive, and socially unconventional woman whose relationships and choices challenge established notions of feminine morality. This research paper examines *Paro: Dreams of Passion* from the perspectives of gender, power, patriarchy, and female agency. It argues that Gokhale uses Paro's character to expose the unequal moral standards applied to men and women and to question the social structures that regulate female behaviour. The paper further examines Paro's pursuit of personal freedom, the relationship between sexuality and power, the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the limitations surrounding female autonomy. Although Paro's choices do not always lead to emotional fulfilment, her refusal to conform makes her an important figure in the study of the representation of the modern Indian woman.*

Keywords

Namita Gokhale, Paro, Gender, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Feminism, Sexuality, Power, Identity, Indian English Fiction, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Indian English fiction has grown to be a significant literary medium for exploring the shifting social, cultural, and psychological aspects of Indian culture. In addition to challenging conventional beliefs about femininity, marriage, sexuality, family, and social morality, female novelists in particular have made substantial contributions to the representation of female experiences. Namita Gokhale is a significant modern Indian English novelist in this regard. Women who balance their personal goals with societal standards are often the subject of her articles. Her literature explores the intricacies of identity as well as the ways that gender affects interpersonal interactions and social behavior.

Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, her debut novel published in 1984, is particularly significant because of its unconventional portrayal of female desire and independence. The novel centres on Paro, an urban woman whose personal choices and relationships challenge conventional expectations concerning women. Instead of portraying the female protagonist



primarily as a dutiful daughter, wife, or mother, Gokhale presents a woman who attempts to determine the direction of her own life. Paro's character consequently raises important questions about female agency, sexual autonomy, social morality, and patriarchal power.

The book might be interpreted as a critique of a society where women are expected to follow predetermined standards of behavior. Paro is contentious because of her unconventionality, but it also makes her a significant literary figure for analyzing evolving conceptions of gender. As a result, the current study examines the book from a feminist standpoint, focusing in particular on gender, power, patriarchy, female desire, and agency.

Objectives of the Study:

The major objectives of this study are:

- ✓ To examine the representation of women in Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion*.
- ✓ To analyse Paro as an unconventional or "new" Indian woman.
- ✓ To explore the relationship between gender and power in the novel.
- ✓ To examine the representation of female desire and sexuality.
- ✓ To study the operation of patriarchal values and gender double standards.
- ✓ To analyse Paro's struggle for individual identity and autonomy.
- ✓ To examine the conflict between tradition and modernity.
- ✓ To understand the feminist significance of the novel.

Research Methodology:

This study follows a qualitative and textual method of literary analysis. The primary text is Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion*. The novel is examined through feminist literary criticism, particularly concepts related to patriarchy, gender roles, female agency, sexuality, identity, and power. Relevant critical ideas concerning women's representation in literature and Indian English fiction are used to interpret the protagonist and the social world presented in the novel. The study is primarily analytical rather than empirical and focuses on the representation and interpretation of gender within the literary text.

Namita Gokhale as a Contemporary Indian English Novelist:

Namita Gokhale is an influential Indian writer, editor, publisher, and literary figure. Her fiction is marked by an interest in women's lives, cultural identity, relationships, history, mythology, and social change. She frequently creates female characters who exist in tension with conventional social expectations. Her literary works demonstrate an interest in the psychological and social dimensions of women's experiences.

Gokhale's significance as a novelist lies in her willingness to address subjects that were often considered uncomfortable or controversial. Questions of female sexuality, desire, marriage, identity, and social morality occupy an important place in her writing. Her approach does not simply divide characters into "good" and "bad" categories. Instead, she creates complex individuals whose actions reflect the contradictions of their social environment. *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is an early and significant example of this literary approach.

An Overview of *Paro: Dreams of Passion*:

Paro: Dreams of Passion is centred on the life, personality, and relationships of Paro. The story is presented through the perspective of Priya, whose observations contribute to the reader's understanding of Paro and the social environment surrounding her. Paro is portrayed as a woman who does not comfortably fit into conventional expectations of femininity. Her relationships with men constitutes an important part of the narrative. However, the novel should not be understood merely as a romantic narrative. These relationships allow Gokhale to explore broader questions



concerning gender, desire, social reputation, class, power, and morality. Paro's choices repeatedly bring her into conflict with conventional expectations. The urban social environment of the novel is also significant. It represents a world that appears modern and sophisticated but continues to operate according to deeply established assumptions about gender. Through this contradiction, Gokhale reveals the gap between apparent modernity and continuing patriarchal attitudes.

Paro as the New Woman:

Paro can be interpreted as a representation of the "new woman" in Indian English fiction. The traditional image of the Indian woman has often been associated with sacrifice, obedience, domestic responsibility, modesty, and conformity. Paro challenges several of these expectations. She is self-conscious, independent-minded, and willing to make personal choices even when those choices are socially controversial.

Her importance lies not in her perfection but in her refusal to accept a predetermined identity. She does not simply allow society to define her. Her attempts to make decisions about relationships and personal life indicate a desire for autonomy. This makes her a complex figure in the context of feminist literary analysis.

At the same time, Gokhale does not present freedom as uncomplicated. Paro's choices produce emotional and social consequences. Her experiences suggest that individual agency operates within larger structures of power. A woman may desire freedom, but social expectations, relationships, economic circumstances, and cultural morality can restrict that freedom.

Gender and Patriarchy:

Gender is one of the central concerns of the novel. Patriarchal society traditionally assigns different behavioural expectations to men and women. Women are expected to be modest, faithful, controlled, and respectable, whereas men frequently receive greater freedom in matters of relationships and sexuality.

Paro's character exposes this unequal moral system. Her behaviour is examined and judged because she does not conform to conventional expectations. The reactions to her choices reveal the social mechanisms through which female behaviour is controlled.

The novel therefore demonstrates that patriarchy is not limited to explicit male authority. It can also operate through social expectations, reputation, morality, family structures, and cultural conventions. Women may internalise these expectations and participate in judging other women. Gokhale's representation of Paro brings these mechanisms into question.

Female Desire and Sexuality:

One of the most significant aspects of Paro is its treatment of female desire. Traditional literary representations have frequently presented female sexuality through male perspectives or within the boundaries of marriage and domesticity. Gokhale's portrayal of Paro gives greater importance to a woman's desires and choices.

Paro's relationships challenge the assumption that women should remain passive in matters of love and sexuality. Her character asserts that female desire is a part of human identity and cannot simply be erased by social convention.

However, the novel also reveals the complications associated with sexual freedom. Desire exists within a social structure that can judge and control women. Consequently, Paro's experience demonstrates both the possibility of female agency and the social consequences of exercising that agency.

Power Relations in the Novel:



Love and personal relationships in Paro are closely connected with power. Relationships between men and women can involve emotional, social, economic, and sexual forms of power. Gokhale demonstrates that personal relationships are rarely completely separate from the social structures in which individuals live.

Paro attempts to negotiate these structures through her personality and choices. Her confidence and independence provide her with a degree of agency, but she cannot completely escape the influence of patriarchal society. The novel therefore presents power as dynamic rather than simple.

The question of who controls a relationship, who makes decisions, whose desires are recognised, and whose behaviour is judged becomes particularly important. Through such questions, Gokhale transforms personal relationships into a larger examination of gender politics.

Female Agency and Resistance:

Female agency refers to a woman's capacity to make decisions and act upon them rather than simply accepting externally imposed roles. Paro demonstrates agency by attempting to control important aspects of her personal life. She refuses to remain entirely within the boundaries prescribed for women.

Her resistance is primarily personal rather than political. She does not necessarily organise a social movement or openly campaign against patriarchy. Instead, her everyday choices become forms of resistance. Her unconventional lifestyle challenges the assumption that women must always conform.

Paro's agency, however, is not absolute. Her experiences show that individual freedom is shaped by social circumstances. This makes her character more realistic and complex. Gokhale suggests that resistance to patriarchy can be difficult, contradictory, and emotionally demanding.

Tradition and Modernity:

The conflict between tradition and modernity is another important theme of the novel. The social environment represented in Paro appears modern, educated, and urban. Yet traditional assumptions about women continue to influence attitudes and behaviour.

This contradiction is central to Paro's experience. She occupies a modern environment but encounters traditional expectations concerning female respectability. Her struggle illustrates how social change does not automatically eliminate patriarchal attitudes.

Gokhale therefore presents modernity critically. Modern clothing, education, urban lifestyles, and social sophistication do not necessarily produce gender equality. Genuine modernity must also involve a transformation in attitudes towards women's autonomy and individuality.

Marriage, Love and Relationships:

Marriage and romantic relationships are examined in the novel as institutions influenced by social expectations. Traditional marriage often involves prescribed gender roles, and women may be expected to sacrifice personal desires for family stability.

Paro's unconventional approach to relationships questions the assumption that marriage is the only legitimate framework for female emotional and sexual life. Her experiences demonstrate that love cannot always be reduced to social conventions.

At the same time, the novel does not suggest that freedom from conventional relationships automatically produces happiness. Paro experiences complexities and contradictions in her relationships. Gokhale consequently avoids offering a simplistic solution and instead presents relationships as psychologically and socially complicated.



Social Hypocrisy and Gender Double Standards:

Gokhale's novel exposes the hypocrisy of a society that claims to be modern while continuing to impose unequal standards on women. Gender double standards become particularly visible when women's sexual and personal choices are judged more severely than those of men.

Paro's unconventionality makes her the subject of social judgement. Her experiences reveal how female reputation is constructed and controlled. A woman who refuses conventional expectations can easily be labelled immoral or unacceptable.

Through this process, Gokhale questions the foundations of social morality. The novel encourages readers to ask whether morality is genuinely universal or whether it is selectively applied according to gender.

Feminist Significance of the Novel:

From a feminist perspective, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is significant because it places female experience at the centre of the narrative. The novel allows questions concerning women's desires, choices, identity, and social position to become major literary concerns.

Paro can be seen as a figure of resistance because she refuses to accept a completely predetermined role. Her character challenges patriarchal definitions of respectable womanhood. At the same time, the novel recognises the difficulties of achieving complete autonomy within a patriarchal society.

The feminist significance of the novel therefore lies in its questioning rather than in presenting a simple model of liberation. Gokhale encourages readers to reconsider the assumptions through which women's lives are interpreted and judged.

Paro's Character: A Critical Perspective:

Paro is deliberately complex and controversial. She cannot be easily classified as either a conventional heroine or an anti-heroine. Her confidence and independence make her attractive as a symbol of female freedom, while her relationships and choices expose the contradictions of personal liberation.

This complexity is one of the strengths of Gokhale's characterization. Paro is not presented as a perfect role model. Instead, she represents the difficulties experienced by an individual who attempts to negotiate personal desires within a restrictive social environment.

Her character also demonstrates that female agency does not necessarily mean complete control over one's circumstances. A woman may make choices and still encounter social, emotional, and structural limitations. Paro's complexity therefore enriches the feminist possibilities of the novel.

Major Findings:

The study reveals several important aspects of *Paro: Dreams of Passion*. First, the novel challenges conventional representations of Indian women. Second, it exposes patriarchal structures that regulate female behavior. Third, it gives significant attention to female desire and sexuality. Fourth, it demonstrates the relationship between gender and power in personal relationships. Fifth, Paro represents an attempt to achieve female autonomy within a socially restrictive environment.

The study also finds that Gokhale presents modernity as incomplete when social attitudes remain patriarchal. The novel demonstrates that women's liberation is not simply a matter of individual choice; it is also connected with broader cultural and social structures. Paro's experiences consequently reveal both the possibilities and limitations of female agency.

Conclusion:



Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is an important work for understanding the changing representation of women in Indian English fiction. Through the unconventional protagonist Paro, Gokhale explores gender, sexuality, power, identity, and female agency. Paro challenges the traditional image of the submissive and self-sacrificing woman and attempts to exercise control over her personal choices.

The novel's significance lies in its exposure of patriarchal morality and gender double standards. It demonstrates that women's choices are frequently judged according to standards that are not equally applied to men. At the same time, Gokhale avoids presenting female freedom as an uncomplicated achievement. Paro's experiences reveal the emotional and social consequences of resisting conventional norms.

From a feminist perspective, Paro is therefore a significant literary character because she raises fundamental questions about who has the right to define a woman's identity, desires, relationships, and choices. Gokhale's novel challenges readers to reconsider conventional definitions of morality and femininity. *Paro: Dreams of Passion* consequently remains a valuable text for studying gender politics, female desire, patriarchy, and the emergence of the independent woman in contemporary Indian English fiction.

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