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WOMEN OF DECADENCE IN THE INDIAN FIN DE SIÈCLE IN PARO: DREAMS OF  
PASSION

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ABSTRACT

Namita Gokhale is one of the most distinguished Indian novelists in English of the post-colonial era who is internationally recognized for her writings which are intermingled with varied themes. "Paro: dreams of passion" by Namita Gokhale has been published in the year 1984. The Indian fin de siècle was an age of tremendous stage. Namita Gokhale created free-spirit, independent, educated and tries to find a place for new woman through her protagonists' dreams. The figure of the New Woman created by Gokhale threatened conventional ideas about ideal Indian womanhood. She is a renowned author of novels, fictions and collection of short stories. Women have significant place in her novels, in study of her work, women subject cannot be ignored. Gokhale's characters speak the author's mind eventually the characters grow and challenge the traditional values and societal norms. Arguments for and against the New Woman are not similar with all the sexes, where many men favored the new women and found her sensible, while many women passionately were against women emancipation and freedom.

A new air of sexual freedom also emerged in the *fin de siècle*. Although still a controversial subject, writers such as Namita Gokhale, Manju Kapur, Shobha De and others have addressed sexual desires and dreams of new women demanding their proper place in society.

**Key words:** Fin de siècle, dreams, gender and sexuality

The new women in Paro

Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House', first published in 1854 gave a traditional role to women. A woman can be a loving wife devoted to husband and her in-laws or a helping mother for her children. The woman has to fit in this stereotypical image and cannot be accepted other than that. A working woman has to balance her family and profession and is always expected to give priority to family when need to decide between two. As a general rule a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention.

Fiction during the *fin de siècle* reacted against such traditional ideas in a number of different ways. Gokhale wants us to believe and there are times we do, only wanting more. I wished at times, that may be the story of the novel Paro: dreams of passion, would continue and lengthen or so, because it had that potential. The women, Paro and Priya in the novel were not extraordinary. They do not take life-changing decisions, or

change the world but what they do instead is connect with the reader and make them see things and situations a little differently.

The protagonist Paro in 'Paro: Dreams of Passion' is born modern, can be thought as product of western because of her convent education. She is a new woman, who takes her life in her control. She is divorced, had relationship with Avinendra, whom she wanted to marry, shows her modernity yet was unable to persuade his mother to accept her as 'bahu'. The author also desires to demonstrate the double standards of society in treatment, set for men and women. B.R. keeps illicit relations before and after marriage with other women. For men, it is permitted to involve with many women but the rules are different for women. It is a sin for a woman to love or have relations with other men.

Another character Priya, is torn between tradition and modernity. This condition is even worse where she tries to compromise with her husband and also desires for true love. She reveals an intriguing picture of an ordinary middle class educated woman, who narrates the lifestyle of the protagonist Paro. The Story of the novel entirely revolves around their life (Paro & Priya), their relations, their conflicts, their admiration, and how their life styles affect each other.

The character of Priya is more subtle. She is independent and intelligent, but with her marriage to Suresh and her willingness to play the dutiful wife, she loses her identity. The fact Priya survives while Paro meets such a horrific end perhaps indicates that Gokhale disliked the New Woman in particular, while admiring her more traditional counterpart.

#### **Decline and fall**

Suffering is the essential part of the novel; we are sympathized by the pain of Priya and also witnessed Paro's distress. Both the women characters show us, in disturbing but illuminating detail how violence and cruelty register on the psyche. It depicts female traumatic experiences, and articulates the complex relation between trauma, gender and signification. Gokhale wants to notify her reader that every person has to go through some traumas in life, few things can't be avoided, As quoted by Zadie Smith -

"A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals--that they can't help but reenact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another, from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign." — **Zadie Smith, *White Teeth***

Paro's death and Priya's dilemma in life shows that though women have been empowered with equal rights and privileges from constitution even though women have no escape from male dominated society and power politics and ultimately has to choose the life of menial slave losing her identity as in Paro, although the protagonist Paro dominated Avinendra, the son of Minister of state for Industry and young enough to be her son, but ultimately he too leaves her to isolation and she goes through mental trauma. In this novel, isolation operates at two levels - physical and mental. Physical isolation may be within the four walls of home and mental isolation occurs when one feels no one cares for. Both Paro and Priya experience the trauma of isolation.

Gokhale's women characters in Paro: dreams of passion show generation of doubly marginalized Women: first by their binding to native culture and secondly by the dominant forces of patriarchy. Priya comes under the first category where after the death of her father, she assumes the role of man in the family by working and supporting her brother financially for his education and also emotional support to both her mother and brother. She remains in constant conflict with the traditions of society as well as her own mother, and is seen contemptuous towards the institution of marriage which is considered as the be all and end all of a girl's life especially in Indian society. Commenting on marriage Simone de Beauvoir says:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a protectoris for her (woman) the most important of undertakings.....She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not by active congruent but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master..... (Beauvoir, p- 352)

Later when she is married, she adjusts with her husband's wishes and life style which was totally different from what she was leading earlier thus Gokhale tries to explain that society expects change and adaptation from women only. She stays with her husband Suresh following the society norms and keeps on loving her boss. She is always in dilemma and leads the life not of her choice but as given by her husband. Suresh warns Priya about her dress and smoking. Priya says, "I tried to take up smoking but Suresh would have none of it, and even tried to restrain me wearing anything but saris" (**Paro: dreams of passion, p-3**). Gokhale portrays Suresh, like any other traditional husband who would like and appreciate high class social cultures like smoking and wearing western dress of women but unable to accept the same culture at home. Men especially have different opinions for women in and outside their home.

Gokhale concentrates upon the sufferings of Priya in *Paro: dreams of passion*, a woman who prefers to be mute and inarticulate in a traditional setup. She was quiet when her boss gets married to another woman and also when her husband doesn't enquire about her. We empathize with Priya when she bends her wishes for others happiness. Whereas *Paro* seems to be of second category reacting against the idea of patriarchy and hence are bold enough to cross the limits of sexual codes imposed by society. Gokhale's desire is to illustrate the different characters and conditions of women and their reaction towards the society. Both the protagonist of the novel under study liberated themselves from the society norms. *Paro* due to her courage and convictions becomes the symbol of emancipation and individuality. However, later *Paro* is ruined to suffer from weakening of emotions and distrust due to her uncontrolled freedom ending up as a disillusioned and disheartened woman. Her conflict is extended from her own mother to Avinendra's mother, who hated *Paro* as her son was under her control. Margaret Notar and Susan Mc Daniel wrote an article in the journal 'Adolescence' describing the mother daughter relationship as, ".....often conflictual, particularly during their daughter's adolescence, and (it) manifests many of the ambiguities and confusions about the social meanings of womanhood and motherhood" (**Notar**).

It's very throbbing to witness *Paro*; who was the epitome of beauty and high class, ends her life as a kept of a political leader. Readers live the reality and fantasy life through *Paro* and Priya. Priya's isolation can be very well noticed when she was going through mental trauma after her miscarriage and Suresh as an advocate was unable to fetch time for her. She started confining her thoughts into the diary instead of complaining or disturbing her husband. The novel reflects the mysterious standard of Indian society. Divorce becomes sin in Indian middle class society but after the divorce *Paro* is "liberated" (**Paro: dreams of passion, p- 41**) But *Paro*'s freedom is not free from agony, jealousy, envy and fear. The pace of her life is very fast and in quick succession we find she "has done it all, she's left a husband and a lover..." (**Paro: dreams of passion, p- 49**)

Gokhale explores how freedom for women is like a myth. This chapter tries to appraise the emancipation of both women characters by comparing their characters, situations, reactions towards people and society and compromises they had to carry out for their freedom or to live life of their own choice. The study of the novel finds that the root of Gokhale's feminism is in the sufferings of women which are caused due to conflicts between tradition and modernity. Priya is in continuous impasse in fine-tuning her life whereas *Paro* is seen modifying her life to attain peace and happiness. Family and profession is yet another cause of women's sufferings. It is reflected in the novel as Priya becomes disturbed when her boss BR announces his marriage party for the staff. Later due to her family demands she had to marry and follow the traditional set up of society, *Paro* on the other hand has always been neglected by her parents and thus became extra modern, ambitious, discourteous and a spoil brat. Her ambitious and dominating personality becomes the reason of her downfall.

## Conclusion

Gokhale's keen surveillance of woman's condition in the post-modern world explores the confused state of women's psyche with identity crisis. Education has no doubt given wings and voice to today's women, but at the same time she finds that educated women in India have changed their beliefs in lifestyle therefore creating inner and outer conflicts and more dilemmas affecting their psychic conditions. She always fights against the society norms which restrain her freedom and Gokhale have done justice to the protagonists by giving them the freedom they fought and desired. Thus, Namita Gokhale in *Paro: dreams of passion* visualizes the whole cultural

scenario from locus of oppression, suppression, isolation, depression, domination, amalgamation, frustration and emancipation of women characters.

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