

Unmasking The Masks: A Close Reading of Namita Gokhale's A Himalayan Love Story

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Abstract

Namita Gokhale's novel A Himalayan Love Story is essentially a poignant tale of the love of Parvati and Mukul which remains unconsummated due Hiranand Joshi's belief in the concept of miscegenation. It is a reiteration of the fact that true lovers are fated to be pulled apart. The novel aims to distinguish between love and lust. Though Parvati sleeps with Salman and Raju, she never experiences emotional fulfilment. Similarly, Mukul's physical relationship with his wife Adeleine and Pasang Rampa does not give him any joy. However, their longing for each-other wanes with the passage of time. The present study is an essay to navigate how the real faces of characters are unmasked in the novel. At first, it is Parvati who unmasks the real character of her mother which distances her from her. Then, to her is unmasked the homosexual nature of her husband, Lalit. Next, Hiranand's real nature is revealed to us and we are shocked to know that his preachings and practices are widely different. To us is also revealed the true nature of Parvati and Mukul who yield to the physical temptations. The paper also discusses the problems of widowhood, girls' education and complications of human relations as the novel is chiefly woven around them.

Keywords: Himalayan, Love, Lust, Miscegenation, Unmasking, Widowhood

Namita Gokhale (born 1956) is one of the most prominent novelists of contemporary Indian English literature. She is a fictionist, writer, publisher, editor and literary festival director. It was she who conceptualized and hosted for *Doordarshan* a hundred-episode multi-lingual book show *Kitaabnama: Books and Beyond*. She is also a founder and co-editor of Jaipur Literature Festival which is also known as the *Kumbh Mela* of literature. In recognition of her literary contribution to Indian English literature, she has been honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Things to Leave Behind* in 2021.

Namita is an alumna of Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, from which she was, later on, dismissed for not attending a course on the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer. Her career as an

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editor and publisher started at a bare age of seventeen when she started editing and managing *Super*, a 1970s era film magazine which she continued editing for seven years. Her oeuvre includes eleven novels and eight non-fiction books. Her novels are *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994), *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows*(1999), *Shakuntala: The Book of Memory*(2005), *Priya: In Incredible Indyyaa* (2011), *The Habit of Love*(2012), *Things to Leave Behind* (2016), *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions*(2017), *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (co-authored with Malashri Lal, 2020) and *The Blind Matriarch*(2021). Her non-fiction includes *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women* (1994), *The Book of Shiva*(2000), *The Puffin Mahabharata* (2009), *In Search of Sita*(co-edited with Malashri Lal, 2009), *Travelling in, Travelling Out*(edited, 2014), *Himalaya: Adventures, Meditations, Life*(co-edited with Ruskin Bond, 2016), *The Himalayan Arc:Journeys East of South East*(edited, 2018) and *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love*(2018).

Namita Gokhale, in her fiction and non-fiction, explores social, political, economic and psychological issues like human relations, poverty, girls' education, casteism, love, longing, lust, homosexuality, gender issues, hilly life, marriage, widowhood, political corruption and what not. Gokhale, as a writer, has tried her hands at different genres of literature like essays, stories, memoirs, novels, travelogues and recreation of mythological texts. As a writer, she was influenced by *The Tale of Genji*, Kalidasa, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Muriel Spark.

However, her writing betrays a strong impact of her Kumaoni background which never leaves her. In 1998, writing for India Today, Nalini Shyam says, " All of her work seems to be stuck with her personality as a Kumaoni Brahmin girl"(India Today, 1998). She goes on to quote Gokhale who avers, "My way of looking at the world remains trapped in that primary identity; once you start loving the hills, they hold on to you"(India Today, 1998).

The story of the novel *A Himalayan Love Story* is narrated by two characters of the novel- Savitri and Mukul. The first part is narrated from the perspective of Parvati, while the second, from that of Mukul Nainwal. The novel is essentially about the emotional unfulfillment of all the major characters- Parvati, her mother, Mukul, Lalit, Hiranand Joshi and Irra. Both men and women seek and find sexual gratification outside marriage as it is not available there in their married life. Savitri's mother seeks it in Shrikrishnji; Savitri in Salman and Raju; Mukul in Lalit and Pasang Rampa; and even Hiranand Headmaster is conjectured to have a mistress. This gratification, however, brings in a sense of guilt in the mind of characters from which they never find absolution. But for this kind of transgression, they are not entirely responsible. Their

circumstances like penury and disinterestedness of the partner force them into such a kind of brief liaison. Savitri's mother yields to Shrikrishnji because she owes him a debt. Her long widowhood is also a factor that might have gravitated her to that man. Parvati, as a child, was a witness to her mother's immoral act. Therefore, she easily yields to the advances of her history teacher, Salman, who used to teach her history. After marriage, when her husband, Lalit, shows no interest in her at all, she quenches her desires by sleeping with his younger brother, Raju. Mukul's first love and his marriage both fail and so, in a moment of lust, he could not control the desires of his body and sleeps with Pasang Rampa, a Tibetan girl. Lalit is a different person altogether. He is homosexual and he has had a relationship with Mukul. So, his marriage with Parvati does not work. Neither of them is able to enjoy conjugal bliss and live apart under the same roof. In a way, the life of almost all the major characters is influenced by Hiranand Headmaster's 'concept of miscegenation' which rules out the possibility of the marriage of Parvati with Mukul and binds her to Lalit for life. And, thus, three lives and more are spoiled. The novel opens when Parvati is a young school-going child. She grows up in Jeolikote, "a popular tourist halt on the road to Nainital"(1) where she lives with her widowed mother. She lost her father to tuberculosis when she was only a year old. Her mother was married to this rich man from Almora who squandered away all his wealth on "gambling and other addictions"(6). Eventually, he died in penury at thirty-two. Initially, she is a girl withdrawn to herself. She cannot stand double-faced people. She is, forever, full of anger and has a keen sense of unease. She says, "All I ever felt was a constant festering sense of anger and unease. I felt trapped inside my skin and bone and circumference, and for this reason I began at a very early age to avoid people"(1).

Her mother was a beautiful and high-spirited woman who was still full of self-respect even while living in poverty and facing deprivation. She tried her hands at odd jobs like knitting sweaters and bee-keeping. But she never made enough money to afford a decent living. They subsisted on the rent coming from the shop given to Shrikrishnji. Parvati offers us a glance at their miserable life:

We had an absolute minimum of needs: two sets of clothing each, three warm sweaters between the two of us, and one and a half meals a day. In the mid-morning, we ate a meal of watery dal and rice. In the evenings, invariably, we ate potatoes.... We had the potatoes with the leftover rice from the mornings, and sometimes mother would make chapattis (6-7).

Winters on the mountains are always excruciating and Parvati and her mother hardly manage to survive in such times. In one chilly winter, her mother becomes addicted to "steaming sweet-strong tea"(12) and for this indulgence, she depends on the kirana shop owner, Shrikrishnji. She falls into the trap of debts and she becomes involved in a sexual affair with him. As a result, "Her skin seemed to regain an earlier, remembered sheen, and the fine nest of wrinkles around her eyes all but disappeared. Her gait, too, had changed; there was a rhythm to it"(12). Initially, she could not understand the reason for this change in her personality. But when she saw her mother alone in the embrace of Shrikrishnji, she was shocked and her feelings for her mother suddenly changed. It was a kind of ugly revelation to her. Her world lay shattered before her. She expresses her agony:

My world was shattered. People were not as they appeared. There was another life behind their masks. These cavorting figures were no better than ghosts- they belonged to a nightmare. I shut my eyes tightly, willing them to disappear, but they were no wraiths; my mother and our tenant stood before me in the flesh, their true nature unmasked (16-17).

It was the first mask that Parvati unmasked and it left her shattered. Her love for her mother suddenly diminished. She had never thought that her mother could have ever been engaged in such an illicit and immoral act.

A child cannot tolerate anybody between it and its parents. So, Parvati becomes more withdrawn and develops dark circles under her eyes. She would not listen to her mother's coaxing either. But with the departure of Shrikrishnji from her mother's life, they regain closeness again. In the meantime, her mother falls ill with tuberculosis and is admitted to TB sanatorium in Bhowali. She was aware that her mother would soon succumb to this disease. But there were no tears in her eyes, though she was worried about her. The unmasking of her true nature had, perhaps, hardened her (Parvati's) heart.

In her distress and state of loneliness and helplessness, Parvati falls under the care and guardianship of her uncle, Hiranand Headmaster, who brings her to Wee Nooke where her life takes a sudden and decisive turn. At first, she comes to have a passionate affair with Salman Siddiqui, a history teacher, then she falls in love with her adorer, Mukul. While teaching her, Salman gets very close to her and they start having a touching and kissing affair which, later on, culminates in their sexual union when she was in hospital. She is not a virgin now. She says, " I left Wee Nooke a girl, I returned a woman"(29). However, their seamy affair could not last long as it was based on pure lust and there was no feeling of love in it. This relationship can be viewed as a repetition of the affair between her mother and their tenant which was purely

physical and selfish. Salman's disappearance does not come as a shock to Parvati as she had known in their "very first meeting that he was only a shadow"(30).

In youth, heartbreaks and heart healings alternate very quickly. Love affairs before the age of twenty-five are nothing more than cupboard love that is seldom true. So, very soon Parvati forgets Salman and she gets to have an adorer of hers in the person of Mukul Nainwal who is the blue-eyed boy of Hiranand Joshi. She flirts with him and his adoration is like a balm to her soul. Together with Mukul and Lalit, she used to go to the cinema and picnics and they would enjoy singing and laughing together. She loves Mukul so much so that she even knits a scarf for him.

But love and marriage in India are two distinct things. One can fall in love with anyone of any caste. But marriage must happen between two people from the same caste, otherwise the sky would fall. As soon as Parvati turns twenty, Masterji decides to get her married to Lalit, a boy from his caste because marrying outside the caste would amount to 'miscegenation' (104). Though liked by Masterji and loved by Parvati, Mukul fails to marry his lady love. This concept of miscegenation spoils three lives and Parvati, Mukul and Lalit pay dearly for the stupid decision of the headstrong Headmaster who just wanted to be free from the burden of looking after her. It also spoils the life of Parvati's daughter, Irra.

Parvati's marriage, though within the caste, never brings the conjugal bliss to either of them. Lalit, being a gay, does not cast even a single amorous glance at her and her longing remains unsatisfied. Even on their nuptial night nothing happens between them. She says, " My young husband looked puzzled, even oppressed, and kept a stubborn, watchful distance from me"(33), and realizes that "he was as unenthusiastic about our nuptials as I was"(33). The days go by blandly and all she does is to cook for the family. Then, one day, the news of Mukul's arrival fills her with joy. Lalit cannot tolerate it and he slaps her calling her a "prying whore"(35). From then on, she starts sleeping alone in the kitchen and she finds cockroaches less hostile and horrible than her husband.

Mukul's visit to their house is a matter of delight to both Parvati and Lalit. Parvati beautifies herself for the occasion and Lalit could be seen leering at his school friend. It is at this time that Parvati becomes aware of the root cause of the indifference of Lalit towards her. She notices sexual hunger for Mukul in the eyes of Lalit. She realises at once that it is the homosexuality of Lalit that has rendered him unable to feel drawn towards women. She becomes a witness to the unmasking of another human being apart from her mother. And she realises that her life has been ruined not so much by the concept of miscegenation as by the homosexuality of Lalit. She remarks:

If there is any one moment in my life I consider axial, on which all its other movements and motions hinge, it was this one, when I encountered my husband, Lalit, look at Mukul with hunger in his eyes. The mask of lust sat taut upon his ordinary face; the telltale twitch near his mouth made him appear both pathetic and obscene (36).

The life of Parvati and Lalit continues as before. No 'good news' the family expected seems to be on the cards. They seldom talk to each other and continue sleeping apart. But with the coming of Raju, Lalit's younger brother, Parvati feels a surge of lust sweeping inside her and, one night, they end up in each other's arms. Parvati captures the moment thus:

An urgency invaded my body; I looked at his tender young face, which was not a mask, he had not then the smell of the other; he was an ally, he was like me, we were both lonely, our needs possessed us, and we made uncompromising, uncomplicated love (42-43).

But, like Salman, Raju, too, comes into Parvati's life only to douse her physical desires and leave her in the lurch. After the departure of Raju, Lalit's behaviour changes and he shows love towards his wife and as, Parvati remembers, "a nimbus of understanding faltered suddenly between us"(44). As their relationship begins to improve, she starts daydreaming and visualising happy days ahead. But, as luck would have it, their happy days and nights together were very few and far between. One night, Lalit had an attack of tuberculosis and he coughed out blood and was advised to be admitted to the TB hospital in Bhowali. But before he could be sent there, he was dead. However, it was good that Parvati was in the family way and soon she gave birth to Irra in the same hospital where she was deflowered by Salman. She was a burden on Lalit's family after his death and now, after the birth of Irra, the burden of Wee Nooke had increased and the headmaster's heart was sunk deep in despair. Later, through the letter of Hiranand addressed to Mukul, we come to know that Parvati is in a lunatic asylum and her daughter is taken care of by the headmaster's family. In this way, the life of Parvati and her daughter falls into a state of despair and misery. While trying to trace the mental illness of Parvati to her family background, Mukul refers to a tendency of Kumaoni people who come to suffer from lunacy generation after generation. He states:

Mental illness runs like a secret rivulet through the genetic pools of Kumaon. No one is secure from its visitations. From where could Parvati have got that plunging line in her palm? Could it have been her father's sister, who came from Dubkia, and was kept chained in a cowshed until she died? Or was it from the maternal side of her family? Pooran Paper's mother was known on occasion to have walked upon her hands halfway

down the Mall Road. Even Hiranand Headmaster's bitterness was indicative of some deeper inner malady. How often he had instructed me to walk down to the municipal library to borrow and return, volume by volume, the author he referred to, quite unhumorously, as Dr Sigmund Fruit (137).

On the other hand, Mukul Nainwal had been "one in body and soul"(131) with Lalit prior to Parvati's entry in his life. But the arrival of this girl changes him altogether. He is besotted with her. He loves her body and soul. He smiles in her presence, feels "her saffron sari burning"(130) his soul, loves "her slim face"(131), and loses self-control on having a sight of her "pretty tongue, so pink and clean and long"(133). He had access to Hiranand Headmaster's kitchen where he would spend time together with Parvati. On one occasion, Parvati bites Mukul's finger and when she sees blood flowing out, she becomes afraid. When asked by Mukul to bite his finger again, she bites it again, though tenderly this time. Mukul regards it as his "engagement ring"(133). She dresses his wound and, thus, their love story begins. They go to a movie together and spend time in each other's company. He even starts fantasizing about her anatomy. But when her marriage is fixed with Lalit, he sees in it a strange justice and decides "to forswear sex forever"(135). His brief love story breathes its last at the altar of miscegenation. He is helpless and is pitted against an unconquerable fate from which he cannot escape. Abby Leach's statement captures his helplessness, "That man is not the master of his fate but that fate masters him. Do what he will he cannot escape his destiny. Fate is irresistible, unconquerable and its decrees are absolute" (373).

Later on, Mukul goes to Allahabad for Higher Studies and becomes an officer and works for the International Relief Organization and his "main task is to assist the U. N. High Commission for Refugees in logistic matters"(57). However, despite being a successful man, he leads a life of unfulfilment. But no man can live the life of an ascetic for long and the bodily desires will cry for satisfaction. So, forgetting his vows to forswear sex, he fornicates a widow, Adeleine in Oslo. However, their "mating was a solemn and joyless event"(136) as it was not based on mutual love. Mukul marries Adeleine as if to openly defy the Headmaster's belief in the concept of miscegenation. However, their marriage is more of a compromise than a real union of souls. Adeleine is always worried about her daughter. He is just their caretaker. He cannot even introduce his family to her.

The novelist through the marriage of Parvati and Lalit and that of Mukul and Adeleine tries to convey that marriage is not a guarantee of a happy life whether within the caste or outside of it. Parvati and Lalit as well as Mukul and Adeleine form an incompatible pair. Therefore, it becomes evident that in marriage, compatibility of the pair is more important for the survival

of the marriage than the matching of their castes and horoscopes. Parvati's marriage is fixed by Hiranand, while Mukul chooses his own wife. Still both the marriages flunk. Through this, Gokhale seems to be rejecting the idea that the institution of marriage is a refuge that binds two people together for life and they live in happiness. Even though most of the people are unhappy with their married life, there is no other institution which may guarantee even the living together of two individuals for a lifetime.

Mukul is a true lover whose love for Parvati is not based on physical desires, nor does he ever cross the limits of physical boundaries even in a mood of passion. His vow to forswear sex is proof enough of the depth of his love for her. After being separated from Parvati, he never gets involved in any love affair. And he marries the woman he fornicates and even in this sexual relation he experiences no joy, no fulfilment. However, it is Pasang Rampa, a beautiful Tibetan girl, who rekindles his passion and he feels helplessly drawn towards her during his visit to the mountains. She takes him to her dingy room to prove her honesty. Though he is married and she is betrothed, their loneliness and a strong sense of lust force them into a kind of sexual union that hardly brings any joy to him. Mukul captures the moment:

Our bodies meet tentatively, they interrogate each other. Then, reassured by some signals only the soul can read, they are spurred into motion, and we ride each other, faster, faster, our minds hungering, our bodies lusting. It is cold in her room but I am sweating, I smell like an animal. And she? She smells of fear and cheap talcum powder, and suddenly my erection is gone and I am sick and sad and sorry (185).

His first love still haunts his mind and he cannot feel the same passion for anyone as he had felt for Parvati. He, later on, meets her when she is insane. He feels for her and her daughter, Irra. But, apart from making some financial arrangements for them, he could not do much. He has a void in his life which no one can fill now, not even his wife, Pasang Rampa or Parvati in her present unhealthy mental state. His wounds cannot be healed and he must learn to live with them. His failing erection or his inability to feel passionate in the arms of Adeleine and Pasang Rampa may also be attributed to his homosexual relationship with Lalit. He does not feel so aroused sexually in the company of women as he did in the company of Lalit. So, in a way, Mukul and Lalit bear resemblance to Achilles and Patroclus, one erastes(Achilles/Mukul), and the other eromenos(Patroclus/Lalit). However, as Lalit is the eromenos, he is only to be loved by a male and he has no capacity to love a woman, while Mukul, being the erastes, can love both a man and a woman. The tragedy of their life has different reasons. Lalit had no girlfriend prior to his marriage, while Mukul had one. Lalit did not experience any heartbreak, while Mukul had one from which he could never recover.

However, the novel shows that bodily desires, generally, prove too much for our vows of celibacy and, therefore, despite his best efforts, Mukul loses self-control and forgets his vow. In a way, he is the best character in the novel because though he sleeps with two women, he does not enjoy the act. On the other hand, Parvati enjoys her sexual encounters with both Salman and Raju. And, the real character of both stands unmasked before us.

The novel unmasks the real character of Hiranand Headmaster too. He poses to be an ideal teacher. But, in reality, he is full of biases. He is a casteist and believes in the superiority of upper castes and for this reason he puts Nehru ahead of Gandhiji. He refers to the Mahatma as "A Gujarati bania without a baniyan"(115), while about Nehru he says, "Nehru's all right though, an aristocrat. After all, blood will tell"(116). He loves the British, especially, Macaulay, and he hates the freedom fighters. It is his belief in the concept of miscegenation that ruins three lives which, otherwise, could have been saved. He does not help his widowed sister, or else she would not have lived in penury. He arranges the marriage of Parvati with Lalit as he considers her a burden and, again, when Irra is born, he is sad that another burden is added to his responsibility. He does not present before us the image of an ideal teacher. His rigidity with regard to caste hierarchy makes him a man of hackneyed ideas.

The novel especially deals with the miserable condition of widows in the Indian society. Since Namita Gokhale herself became a widow even in her youth, she could well understand the trauma the widows pass through. She, therefore, represents Parvati and her mother as victims of widowhood whose lives are spoiled due to the fact that they are not allowed to be remarried. Their little education does not enable them to find a job for themselves and be self-dependent like their creator, Namita. So, once they become a widow, they become a burden on others, on society and on themselves. All their joys disappear instantly and they either wither away by degrees or go insane. They become objects of male lust as well. In the novel, Namita portrays all major women characters, Parvati, her mother and her daughter, Irra, as beings fated to lead a cursed life. They suffer endlessly and they are at the mercy of men like Hiranand Joshi, Lalit and Mukul.

The novelist also points out the need for the spread of girls' education. She is appalled to see that the girls are married as soon as possible without allowing them to continue their studies. Parents can afford to educate their sons, but spending money on daughters' education seems futile to them. Parvati's own mother was against her receiving education as she considers it "a waste of money"(6). She resented spending money on her books, uniform and highly subsidized school fees as she was not a boy who could, later on, earn money and provide for

her in her old age. Parvati's mother says,

It would be different if you were a boy, she would say angrily, then you could earn and provide for me in my old age. But all you are going to do is get married to some no-good, and take my champakali necklace off with you as dowry. It's a double curse, to be first born a woman, then get straddled with another female to provide for (6)!

Thus, from the foregoing discussion it becomes evident that the novel is essentially about unmasking the masks which hide the true nature and character of people. And we come face to face with the fact that the common blot is held no sin. Savitri unmasks the true nature of her widowed mother when she sees her in the arms of the shopkeeper. But her own mask is unmasked to us when we analyse her relationship with Salman and Raju that is as immoral as her mother's relationship with the shopkeeper. The real character of Lalit and Hiranand Joshi is also unmasked in the course of the novel in which the former is found to be a gay (which is the sole cause of the failure of his and Parvati's marriage) and the latter is found to be a casteist who believes in the hierarchy of castes and, so, his image as an ideal teacher is tarnished. Though Mukul forswears sex after his heartbreak, he gives in to his bodily desires twice, though on both the occasions, he experiences no joy and fulfilment. He could have done something substantial for Parvati and her daughter, Irra, when he meets them. But he fails to rise to the occasion. This may also be regarded as an unmasking of another mask in the novel. In her act of unmasking the real character of human beings, Namita is never harsh and critical. She considers all the digressions as natural which is a part of so many lives whether one accepts it or not.

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Oxford Classical dictionary entry on homosexuality, pp. 720-723; entry by David M. Halperin. Reading The Odyssey (Book XXIV), one discovers that Achilles' bones have indeed been placed in a vase with those of Patroclus, but also learns that Antilochus became closer than any other to Achilles following Patroclus' death, and that Antilochus' bones were also placed within the same vase, but separated from the bones of Achilles and Patroclus, which had been stirred together.

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