

QUEST FOR THE SPIRITUAL HOME IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S SHAKUNTALA: THE PLAY OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS

Volatility, Stock Markets, Sensex, Gold Prices

INTRODUCTION

Namita Gokhale's, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is the stories of Shakuntala, where the main quest of the protagonists is for the spiritual home and not for domestic space for the security of the enclosed space. The concept of the spiritual home is defined as, "a place where you feel you belong, although you were not born there, because you have a lot in common with the people, the culture and the way of life" ("Spiritual," def. 2). Beyond affinity, it is the place where individuals feel the greatest sense of fulfilment and inner peace; it is where the soul's thirst is quenched and a series of negotiations take place in the home irrespective of whether it is physical or spiritual.

In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* Shakuntala's main quest is towards attainment of *moksha* or the ultimate home. Shakuntala's journey begins at Banaras which is also known as Varanasi or Kashi situated on the banks of the River Ganga. In the Skanda Purana Lord Shiva states about Kashi: "This sacrosanct place is very dear to me and no event takes place here against my wish. Even if a person living here happens to be a sinner he has nothing to fear because I protect him. One who lives far from Kashi but remembers it with reverence becomes absolved of all his sins" (4.4.5). Namita Gokhale describes the majesty of the city, "Banaras; holy Kashi. The city of Shiva. The faithful arrive here in the hope of departure. To die in Shiva's city is to escape the remorseless cycle of reincarnation, to get away from eternity, be rid of it. Death lives here, forever mocking life and its passage" (1). To die in Banaras is considered particularly auspicious by many and one who dies here bypasses the

cycle of life and death. The lord Shiva comes to the rescue, and unties knots which bind the soul to the *samsara* hence many people come to Banaras to die. Fred W. Clothey captures the ethos of Banaras in the words, “everyone in Banaras is either praying, or has just prayed or is about to pray” (198). Namita Gokhale’s protagonist, Shakuntala too prays and dies by the banks of the sacred river. Her body lies dead on the ghats of Banaras yet her soul “find no release” (1). Her soul will be released only after she gets the holy Tarakamantra of Lord Shiva, so that her spiritual journey is over. The novel is a description of her journey towards finding this mantra of liberation.

The importance of Banaras is closely associated with the River Ganga. Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganga remits sins and dying in Kashi ensures the release of a person’s soul from the cycle of transmigrations. In Namita Gokhale’s *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the life of human beings is compared to the river Ganga and the protagonist states, “Life is a river, and all life is embodied in this river, this Ganga that flows through our lives. Bhavishya gyan da, bhoot gyan da, vartman gyan da, she carries in her the secrets of the future, the past, and the ever-flowing present” (63). When Shakuntala reaches the river, she feels Ganga’s water on her knees which rid one of sins and to help to attain salvation. Shakuntala believes that the Ganga would help her in the attainment of *moksha*.

In her spiritual journey Shakuntala’s soul narrates the different phases of her life, beginning with her childhood in her parental home through her marital home to that of a wanderer, in search of freedom and the self and ends with the attainment of liberation. Chanakya defines the essence of the soul, “The soul is the witness of transaction and the soul is the witness of everything” (*Maxims* 83). Shakuntala’s soul as the narrator bears witness to the journey of Shakuntala’s life which passes through various crests and troughs of the material world. Her different material experiences do not give her freedom and individual space that she desires, hence, Shakuntala starts her journey as a wanderer and eventually reaches her ultimate home.

In the first phase of her journey, Shakuntala’s soul narrates her life in the parental home. Shakuntala is a village girl in the Kumaon region of the Himalayas, where the mountains, the forests, and other natural objects are her close companions. She is a carefree and very spirited girl, eager and restless to see the world. Gokhale’s Shakuntala opposes traditional thoughts and ideals. She is set to ‘abandon the world’ for self-fulfilment, self identity, and self-realisation. From her childhood she is hungry for experience. There are things which she wants to see, to know, and to do. She is thirsty for new knowledge. She wants to fly unimpeded in the open air but her mother cautions her, “birds return to their nest at dusk but clouds must weep their tears unseen in distant lands” (9). Shakuntala is not willing to play the role of a

traditional woman, and she progressively breaks all the stereotypes. Shakuntala's mother is a typically traditional woman, who accepts the patriarchal system and wants to restrict Shakuntala's activities. She does not allow Shakuntala to take her own decisions. She is not able to understand the true ambition of Shakuntala who wants to be free and to explore the world. Gokhale illustrates how Shakuntala is discriminated by her mother for being a female child. Shakuntala is so driven by anger and shame in the cowshed that she runs from it and seeks refuge in the cave where a rock-demoness is thought to live. There Shakuntala sees a circle of fire floating towards her, "Slinking even further to the side of the path, huddled against a damp rock. The vision descended to the level of my eyes, and I saw an unusually tall woman, naked but for a piece of coarse cloth around her waist, bend down and squat before me" (33). In the cave she feels more protected in the company of the rock-demoness than she has ever felt at home with her mother. Describing the symbolic meaning of a cave, Craig Hamilton Parker writes, "A cave may represent the womb or female sexuality. What you find within the cave or what comes out of it are the new qualities that the unconscious is giving birth to" (15). She portrays the feminine deity as powerful and independent and as a model for the little girl. Shakuntala apprehends the difference between her mother who finds her impure and the demoness who embraces her as pious and introduces her to the blood goddess, "you have been blessed.' . . . 'I see the blood goddess has begun her sacred visitation on your body'" (34). She wants that Shakuntala should understand this physical sign of womanhood as one of power and blessedness. The process of menstruation is not dirty or polluting as, "Woman's menstrual blood was powerful substance. It was a source of feminine strength" (Stern 34). Shakuntala realises the power of blood that is symbolic of life itself. This is a valuable meeting for Shakuntala and the demoness gives her a last advice before she leaves her cave, "you must be strong, Shakuntala. There is little place in your world for strong women, but none for the weak" (36). Thus, this new association of Shakuntala with the demoness gives her safety and courage. The cave represents a womb, which denotes new life, creativity, warmth and safety and symbolises the rebirth of Shakuntala as a strong young woman seeking independence. In this new revival the demoness prompts Shakuntala to stand up for herself and respect her own individuality and womanhood.

In her marital home, there is no other woman competing with Shakuntala for Srijan's affections yet. All household work is done by the maids, Dhanias and Kudaris. Shakuntala discovers that long ago a party of travelling monks had come to the village. Her mother-in-law was deeply influenced by them and she followed them forsaking her domestic home, "I had heard it said that the head lama cast a spell on my mother-in-law. She had been pounding grain in the backyard when the call came. She left the task half-done, the unhusked akshata on the floor, the half-pounded

saktu still in the mortar, the pestle abandoned in the garden. The Sakyamuni had summoned her with his teachings and she left her world to follow him” (43). Shakuntala is unable to understand why Srijan’s mother had renounced the sensual world to find solace on the path of spirituality, “I think I was, even then, envious of my mother-in-law and her hard-won freedom” (44). The action of abandoning the material world or going beyond the walls of comfortable domestic life by Shakuntala’s mother-in-law had finally created her freedom, Shakuntala also makes her way towards being independent and liberated.

Shakuntala plays her role of the wife gracefully and makes a visit to the Matrikas temple, “I went often to this abandoned temple, and sat in the shadow of the wooden pillars where the swallows sheltered, listening to the lazy rustle of the afternoon breeze” (45). It is a place sans priests and the gods are forgotten. No bells ring there, no incense is lit and no prayers are chanted. However, Shakuntala realises that there is room for her to play the role of daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and mistress of the home, but not ‘a room of her own’ where she can enjoy individuality and independence, which would open a window to the vast universe beyond.

After a spell in her marital home, everyone expects Shakuntala to carry Srijan’s son in her womb and give birth to the heir of the family. Shakuntala also wants to strengthen her position in the marital home by gaining motherhood. Nancy Chodorow states that, “Marriage, especially for women is essentially synonymous with child-rearing” (4). After a few months Shakuntala realises that she is not able to conceive and this makes her anxious, “I was painfully aware that I had been lagging in my duties as a wife, every month my ritu would arrive and prove me barren; Srijan’s seed would not prosper within me” (49). People advise Srijan to perform the ‘Agnicayana ritual’ so that his wife might bear sons. Srijan now wants a son in accordance with the social template. He invites a priest from distant Kashi to conduct the Agnicayana. Shakuntala understands the anxiety of her husband, “Anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre my husband decided to initiate the prayer” and she willingly performs all the rituals to be blessed with a child (49). Everybody hopes that Shakuntala would get the blessing of God very soon. In dealing with the priest Shakuntala also has to negotiate emotionally and psychologically with her own self. Her Brahman upbringing prevents her from being blasphemous but she finds it difficult to ignore the overtly condescending behaviour of the priest.

After the *Agnicayana* ritual the next morning, Srijan leaves for the lands of the east. Shakuntala is left alone but she prepares herself in anticipation of his return. She adorns herself and dresses beautifully. She is lonely in her husband’s absence, “Restless, I consoled myself by applying collyrium in my eyes and alta on my feet. I

rehearsed the fourteen kinds of seduction I had surreptitiously studied from the forbidden palm-leaf texts in Srijan's collection. . . .thinking of my husband, in his antelope cloak and glistening gold breastplate, I was lonely without him" (56). Shakuntala feels emotionally attached to Srijan and expects that this would help her to strengthen their conjugal relations. However, her hopes to strengthen the marital bond become weaker when Srijan brings a woman with him from his travels. He tells Shakuntala that Kamalini would work as her handmaiden and offers no other explanation. Srijan requests Shakuntala to "treat her well.' The woman said politely, 'I shall be glad to be of service to you'. . . though her voice had no trace of surrender, but it was melodious; the twanging of a tautly drawn veena string. I felt clumsy and awkward. And, yes, inescapably jealous" (58). Shakuntala is heartbroken and leaves the house to find some solace in the Matrika temple, "It was the only place where I could hide in shame and examine the new reality that confronted me" (58). In the temple, Shakuntala gives vent to her pent up feelings, "I screamed and sobbed aloud, beating my head against the stone walls of the temple like the kind of woman I had not imagined I would ever become. . . . I was not afraid. I felt safe, even secure, in my fierce despair and loneliness. That is the thing about tears: if you cry loud and deep enough they become a form of comfort" (58). Shakuntala tries to console herself with the tenuous thought that Kamalini is just a handmaiden and she would have to follow her command and work according to her wishes. Conditioned by patriarchy, Shakuntala feels betrayed and frustrated, not by Srijan but by Kamalini's presence in the house and says, "I was not angry with Srijan he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. But the hurt and betrayal, the prickling of thorns under the sheath of my skin—I had never known or anticipated these feelings, just as I had never expected my husband to return from his journey to the east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes" (58). Shakuntala's emotional and relational negotiations with Kamalini are thus, based on patriarchy, which situates a woman against a woman.

Shakuntala takes shelter from her seething emotions in the Matrika temple once again, and this time she goes deeper into the temple's sanctum sanctorum, "This was surely the garbhagriha, the womb of the temple. The lamp light cast shadows, moving like ghostly women in a slow dance. . . . The yoni, symbol of the goddess, was engraved upon it. Concentric lotus petals were carved around the yoni, over laid by offerings of old flowers, leaves and petals. Could dakinis and yoginis still be worshipping here? Did spirits of the nether world pay tribute to the goddess in this secret space?" (60). Shakuntala feels protected in 'the womb of the temple:' "I felt protected in the garbhagriha. As I reclined on the stone floor, the terrible events of the day began to recede from my memory. A sense of ease invaded my body, and I felt drowsy, languid. It was as though I was back in the cave with the rock-demoness, the time when I had first run away" (60). She spends the night in the

garbhagriha, reluctant to return home in the dark and at home in the womb of the goddess. This marks the second rebirth of Shakuntala into maturity. If the rock-demoness had made her proud of being a woman, Matrika temple initiates her into the journey for seeking freedom and meaning outside the home.

Shakuntala returns to Srijan's house at dawn, but does not feel at home there. She is drawn to the river which in a striking pathetic fallacy, "beat and crashed relentlessly against the boulders and rocks by the shore" (61). She spends the day by the river talking to Kundan, the fisherman and eating his catch which they cooked on a three-twig fire. Kundan tells her that "Life is a river" and Shakuntala "looked at the river, the mighty goddess. In a day her anger was gone, and she was playful now, a loving, forgiving, easy-going river on a late spring afternoon" (63). Kundan takes forward the lessons that the rock-demoness had taught her and gives a fresh turn to Shakuntala's understanding of life. When she says lightly that, "If life is a river we must be the fish," he answers, "You missed the whole point, Shakuntala . . . The fish are the river, as the river is the fish" (63). This nascent and encapsulated reference to the advaita notion of the world will ultimately lead Shakuntala on her quest for the Divine. The journey, though, will have its convoluted and amorphous beginning in the sensual. It is interesting that fishermen play very important roles in resolving the complexities in the life of Shakuntala.

In anticipation of the birth of her child, Shakuntala makes a visit to the holy temple at Gangadwar to pray for a safe delivery. While wandering on the shore, she sees a man whose looks are 'utterly carefree, reckless and happy.' Shakuntala knows instinctively that he has 'travelled for long and through many worlds.'

Their instinctive and spontaneous mating brings clarity to Shakuntala that she has been seeking long, "Nothing has prepared me for this ecstasy. It defies my life and destiny, disengaging it from the wheel of duty and dharma and what should be, throwing it directly into my own hands" (110). At the same time she realises, "My life has changed; I feel that I can't go where I have come from" (110). The young man now tells her his name—Nearchus. He is from the land of the Yavanas and Shakuntala recalls vaguely that a Yavana is a *mlechha*, a foreigner considered impure and unclean. Nearchus insists, "Come with me, river-goddess. . . . I want to flow in your waters forever" (111). This encounter becomes an extremely significant turning point in the life of Shakuntala. Finally, she reaches the river where Nearchus is waiting for her and in a telling movement she flings her silver anklets into the water. As she gallops away with Nearchus, Shakuntala takes the new name of 'Yaduri,' 'the uninhibited,' the fallen one and says, "On that pebbled shore I left Shakuntala and all her memories" (115). Shakuntala thus, makes a calculated attempt to acquire a new name and thereby a new identity to redefine herself in a sphere removed from the notion of *paap and punya*; "the heaven is so bright and yet

so far away. They seemed to forgive everything we mortals did. There was great consolation in their distance” (121). She hopes for a better life with the Yavana, away from the confining and oppressive walls of her husband’s home.

Shakuntala wishes to enjoy freedom. K. Damodaran describes freedom perspicaciously not as the curtailment of restrictions but as, “the realisation of individuality” (81). Shakuntala is glad to be free and feels like a winging bird not sparing a thought for what she has left behind, “I did not think of the house in the mountain” (129). With a new name she has no history, nobody knows about her, who she is, where she belongs and what is her caste; she lives in the ceaseless present. Only the river Ganga, who travels with her knows Shakuntala but keeps her confidence in her deep waters. Shakuntala seeks to expand her experience, knowledge and imagination at every turn in the journey. Shakuntala is upset when Nearchus is amused at her questions on trade and commerce. He thinks that her curiosity to know things and understand them is unfeminine. Shakuntala however, pays no heed to his assessment of her, absorbed as she is with her new-found independence, “But, I was intoxicated by this utter and absolute freedom, the constant movement, and I was ready to go on and on, until the end of the world if necessary.” (136)

Ultimately, Shakuntala and Yavana meander their way to ‘Kashi.’ She already knew about this city of Shiva through listening to her brother’s tutor, “The faithful arrived here in the hope of departure, for to die in Kashi was to escape the remorseless cycle of birth and rebirth. Shiva, bending over the dead and the dying, whispered his mantra of deliverance into the ears of corpses. The Taraka mantra liberated them, ferried them across the river of oblivion to the far shores of moksha” (137). However, she senses that her presence impedes the freedom of Nearchus who does not have nesting feelings. Shakuntala, it appears, does not want unhampered freedom but the freedom to love and live together with an equal companion. The narrator-soul explains her dilemma, “I did not know what it was that might please or displease him. I did not know that about myself, either” (144).

The return of Yaduri to Shakuntala has taken place but not before Yaduri realises that, “This is not her. This is another: she who knows no reproach, for so utter is her destruction that she is no longer there to be reproached” (160). The insecurity of homelessness overcomes Shakuntala but simultaneously she evinces maturity in the thought that the events in her life are not the responsibility of others, but they are hers alone, “I myself have dishonoured myself. . . . This honour rests only with me” (168). Thus, when a passing astrologer offers her a talisman to protect her from misfortune she replies, “I will have courage and you may leave me to my fate” (168).

Shakuntala’s physical desires are diminished by this time and she follows the voice of her mind rather than the body. This voice of the mind is born of time,

strengthened by the past and ends in experiences which are the projections of the past. Shakuntala recognises that, "It is all the vanity of the senses. . . . everything in life is only a living death" (170). This notion of detached action does not suggest indifference or unconcern but a full consciousness of one's duties and responsibilities; a loving at the deeper level beyond possession and pleasure. The first step that Shakuntala takes in the direction of her new journey is away from Nearchus. Shakuntala sets off towards the other side of the river and enters Kashi with the baby in her womb. On the way there she imagines that she would be blessed with a daughter and begins an emotional involvement with her. Shakuntala wants to share the joys and adventures of life with the daughter in her womb. Withdrawing to an interior space she talks to her daughter, shows her the river and asks her, "When you are born, what will I call you? I mused. Flowing with your fate, you shall be called Ganga" (180). Shakuntala's connection with her unborn daughter is explicable in the description of the mother-daughter bond as described by V. Geetha: "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality which comes from her mother. . . . Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, and preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two like bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other" (79). In wanting to name her daughter after the river, Shakuntala establishes the deeper connection between the river, herself, and her daughter as a continuous stream. Ganga has accompanied Shakuntala from the mountains to the plains in her travels, and Ganga knows her journey as her own.

For the last time she fleetingly thinks about her past and wonders where Srijan and Nearchus are and what they would be doing, but to her, "Both these men seemed like shadows, I could not believe that they had existed, that my life had once been a part of theirs. Now, I was alone, no one's wife or mistress, nor sister. In this frightening bazaar of people, there was only me and my unborn daughter, close and fitting, together and alone" (181). Ultimately, she reaches the Viswanath temple and listens to a reading from the Puranas. Shakuntala is struck by the display of condescension towards the 'other' even in the holy city of Shiva, the great leveller. Vyasa continues to talk of the concept of *Maya* and its power which brings forth the phenomenal world. *Maya* makes this possible by an inter play of the three *gunas*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It projects multiplicity as, "*Maya* creates division, division between the individual soul and the supreme soul. Just as a stick burning at one end, when waved round quickly, produces an illusion of a circle of fire, so is it with the multiplicity of the world. *Maya* deludes us" (283-84). He states that even the gods could not refute this *chakra* of *Maya*, "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). At his words, she realises that the child inside her is also responding to them and strokes her belly to soothe it. The Vyasa continued, “Lord Vishnu comes among us to teach us that all is *Maya*. All pleasures, all pain is illusion. What you gain and what you lose, what is beautiful and what is ugly—it is all the same, all is illusion.” (184). Once the sage Narad went to lord Vishnu to ask about *Maya* and the lord transformed him into a woman, Saubhagyasundari. After different worldly experiences Narad understands the real meaning of *Maya*, “that the world is a mere dream and the true goal of all life is *moksha*. So refrain good folks, from using yourself in these deceptions. Do your duty. Fulfil your karma. Forsake the path of desire” (185). Shakuntala’s life is also like Saubhagyasundari’s where once she was also stuck in the whirlpool of *Maya* that darkened her consciousness and limited it to the boundaries of her personal self. Now, like the sage, she is poised to discover the world beyond *Maya*.

Shakuntala understands that *Maya* is ‘*Avidya*’—ignorance, and it becomes the source of all pain and pleasure in life. At the crossroads, between the sensual and the spiritual, she must choose the path that will take her to the place that she can call home. She deliberates upon the path of renunciation, “I could go to a monastery, a Buddhist Sangha might show consideration for a woman like myself. Srijan’s mother had been a Sakya nun. . . . Perhaps I could follow her path” (187). Still wondering and lost in her thoughts her eyes fall upon three cows, “clustered by the corner of a narrow, labyrinthine lane” (188). The maze of her complex life has narrowed to this one lane where the three cows draw into themselves the innumerable strains of *Maya* and *Moksha*. The three cows may be taken as symbolic of the *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* gunas, as well as of *kama*, *artha*, and *dharma* that govern our lives. They also represent the: divine Kamadhenu: mother of all cows and granter of all wishes; Nandini: divinely beautiful and gentle; and Surabhi: giver of boons. The cows thus strengthen the image of the fullness of life. They remind Shakuntala of the cow Dasyu and her calf in Srijan’s house, and Shakuntala is struck by fierce homelessness that blinds her with tears:

I strayed distractedly into the middle of the lane and found myself directly in the path of a charging bull that appeared as though from nowhere. It raged and stamped its feet, raised its tail and flared its nostrils in a display of anger. A chanting of sacred verses rose from afar; perhaps a procession of monks. The bull bowed its head to me, as if asking forgiveness, before the city shuddered in my vision and pain flashed in my eye like the light of a thousand suns. (188)

This dramatic moment draws her journey closer to the end. The bull is the precursor to *Moksha*, the destroyer of all *Maya*. Prem P. Bhalla describes the religious importance of the bull in Hinduism and its symbolic meaning, “His four legs are symbolic of the four pillars of religion—compassion, charity, austerity and purity,”

and through these four qualities one can attain liberation or Moksha (156). Shakuntala is now on the home stretch in her life's journey.

The last vestiges of attachment are rooted out by the bull, symbolic of Shiva's vehicle: "a torn womb, where my life and my daughter had been, now destroyed. As though to establish it was only doing its duty, the bull once again buried its horn in my stomach" (188). Ravaged by pain Shakuntala, "prayed to all the gods and goddesses, for help, deliverance, anything, even death" and is rewarded by the image of Yama and then of his sister Yami (189). Shakuntala watches a gallery of people pass by as she lies wounded on the ground: a fashionable woman who throws her a coin; an untouchable, Chandala who stops to watch her but does not touch her; and six monks engrossed in their prayers. These three succession of people mark three stages in Shakuntala's journey—the first as the—mistress of the household; the second as Yaduri, the fallen woman; and the third as a quester who renounces the world and seeks the divine. That the three do not stop for her indicate that Shakuntala is no more in a participatory relationship with fellow human beings.

Instead, Shakuntala feels drawn to the motherly image of Yami, "She came to me like a guardian spirit, pulling me gently by the hands from those ill-fated stones to the shelter of our deserted doorway. . . . I clutched desperately at her cold hands as though she were my mother, my saviour, who of course she was" (191). Yami is thus an extension of the rock-demoness and the blood-goddess. Shakuntala yearns to enter the peace that is offered by Yami, she longs to enter her saviour-mother's home. However, she is brought back from the visions of death with the gentle ministering hands of a nun who cradles Shakuntala's head into her lap. Two nuns lift her to the monastery where she is tended with love. Shakuntala imagines that the image of Lord Buddha in the monastery assures her of "forgiveness, promising redemption" (193). Juxtaposed with this is her inherited tradition of karma and Shakuntala is reminded of the Vyasa's words, "The laws of karma play themselves at three levels: in the ether of our thought, in the consequences of our actions, in the finality of our fate." (198)

In this spiritual journey, however, the soul is free of the burdens of the material and the corporal. On the way, Shakuntala's soul refuses to engage with other souls, human or animal, as each must face 'what must be' in accordance with one's own karma. She is now ready to immerse herself in the liberating waters of the, "Ganga, granter of immortality" (199). It is noteworthy that Shakuntala's soul find Shiva or the Taraka mantra, the prerequisite for liberation at Kashi. It returns to the pristine Ganga for liberation, as a soul that returns from the world of experience to its home. Gokhale goes a step further, and ascribes the meaning of the Taraka as Shakuntala lies dying, she feels:

A white light glared down at me. Kind hands held out water in a brass urn, the river roiled and swelled with unease. ...I realised that I had lived my life one way rather than another. The world would always have its way; at least I had searched for mine. That was the Taraka, Shiva's mantra of deliverance (207).

Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* demonstrates the successful journey of the protagonist Shakuntala to the spiritual home. She walks in different directions and follow separate paths, but is successful in reaching her ultimate destinations. Gokhale's *Shakuntala* finds liberation in the holy city Kashi, the abode of Lord Shiva, and her quest is fulfilled in terms of the spiritual, the existential and the gendered social. Eventually, she becomes extraordinary by choosing to walk on the paths different from those of the common material world. On these paths she breaks all bonds, including strong emotional attachments of family and motherhood. She chooses to negotiate her ways towards spiritual growth and self-realisation after severing all attachments from the everyday world. She leaves her material home and undertakes remarkable journeys on the way to her spiritual home. In the process, as she makes her way to a higher truth and freedom, she also maps significant milestones for women in the familial, relational, social and material landscapes.

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