Sexual Perversion in Namita Gokhale’s *A Himalayan Love Story*  

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Abstract  

The research paper highlights how Namita Gokhale’s selected work admonishes lusciously images of female sensuality and eroticism adequately covering the colours and vigor of sentiments into a harmonious pattern of aesthetically integrated ideology of contemporary humanity and feminism. The present work confines to Gokhale’s *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996). It shows the struggle of women to pattern their behaviour after their own notion of sexuality. Parvati, the central character in the novel initiates sexual revolution through her romantic ethics which lack emotional commitment. As the drones are to their female mates, so are men to Parvati. She looks upon men as just sexual partners and not as providers. Her audacious perversity is a part of her protest against religio-social conventionality. Her violation of the ethical codes results in regret and ultimately in insanity.  

**Key Words:** Perversion, Liberated, Emotion, Desire, Incestuous, Homosexuality, Marriage.  

‘Perversion’ originally means sexual conduct. The definition of ‘sexual perversion’ has shifted considerably over time. Today, psychologists generally refer to non-traditional sexual behaviour as sexual deviation. In this sense, sexual perversion involves all sexual acts that are contrary to normal desires. Adultery, fornication, incest, prostitution, idolatry and promiscuity are some of the specific forms of perversion. Today most young women are sexually active outside marriage. Promiscuity is taken for granted to be a part of feminist liberation which aims at empowerment of women with respect to social, cultural, economic and professional independence.  

Although all men and women are born with equal rights, it is very unfortunate that most societies operate under extreme patriarchal conditions, which are often suffocating for the women folk. Men are generally more interested in casual sex and want more partners in uncommitted relationship. Traditional women look for greater emotional commitment in a relationship and loyalty to their partners. Modern women, on the contrary, certainly gain in sexual freedom but lose out of emotional commitment. Feminists such as Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desari, Shashi Deshpande, Shoba De, Githa Hariharan and Manju Kapur celebrate the sexual revolution of the day as it has brought greater awareness of human sexuality and broken the silence that surrounded sex in much of society. Lukas points out, “Today,
however, it seems the pendulum has swung to the other side, and a new ethic of silence surrounds the problems associated with casual sex and the benefits of reserving sex of committed, monogamous relationships” (3). Gokhale’s radical stand on the much debated issue of sexual deviance as presented in her second novel A Himalayan Love Story is discussed in this paper.

Parvati, the protagonist in the novel demolishes the stereotypical confines of sexual boundaries by exploring her identity through exerting her sexuality. Parvati is the neglected daughter of a Brahmin widow growing up in Jeolikote, one of the most backward areas in the state of UP. The Kumaon hills form a perfect backdrop for Parvati. She is beautiful, fragile and strong as a wild flower which grows without any care on the hillside. She lives in poverty with her mother whose moods change like a sky above the hills. As a young girl, Parvati often lives in a world of fantasy. She satisfies her unfulfilled desires through imagination, “I imagined myself confronting a class full of children” (10). Her wish to enjoy a rich life is expressed as, “I’m going to build a palace…’a palace of pine cones. We can even live there. It will be warm and cozy in winter, and if I paint the pine cones golden everyone will think we are rich” (13).

Parvati learns to cope with the darkness which envelopes her world after her father’s death. Her eyes forever downcast and fearful reveal nothing, yet her heart is full of longing for the unknown and unexplored. The main topic of conversation between Parvati and her mother is bee-keeping. They plan to earn money through different ways. Gokhale’s use of bee-keeping imagery in the novel is significant. It is well-known scientific fact that the male bees are solely produced for sex and after which they are genetically programmed for self-destruction. The plight of the male honey-bee is one of the classic examples of sexual suicide. The main function of the male honey bee in the hive is to fertilize the queen-bee and it dies within minutes of the copulation. Its sole purpose of existence is sexual mating.

The Pahari social set-up which forms the back-drop of A Himalayan Love Story is male-centered. Pahari men enjoy their leisure time in the hillside. They are allowed to take more than one wife, although this option is practically open only to wealthy men. It is important to note that the position of women in the Pahari society is distinctly superior to the position of women living in the plains. They play an essential and recognized role in almost all aspects. Parvati and the Pahari girl notice that the Pahari men are the drones who leave labour to their women, who carry out all the needs of their families. It is a burning sight to see the women walk balancing extraordinary heights of fodder and fuel wood on their heads while the Pahari men always crowd around the local tea shops, playing cards or purposefully
spitting out tobacco. Pahari women are noticeably more out spoken and self confident in the presence of others, including strangers, as compared to women of the plains. Rich persons like her classmate Lata Sah’s mother, for whom Parvati’s mother knit many sweaters are the queen bees. Parvati does not see any justice in the system around her. The deplorable conditions of the village women and the hypocritical behaviour of the village men annoy her.

As the first step of Parvati’s resistance to social injustice, she acquires the boldness to point out the frailty of her mother, a Pahari middle-class Brahmin widow. She always wants to have “steaming sweet strong tea” (12). It is an addiction for her. Despite her poverty she abandons her usual frugality and recklessly keeps buying tea and jiggery from her tenant shopkeeper, by maintaining an account with him. It is not adjusted in the rent. Parvati does not approve of it. But her mother quiets her saying, “It’s the only thing that keeps me going…Don’t stop me from having this tea…It’s only indulgence” (12).

Parvati is completely disappointed with her mother’s activity. She is upset to discover her sexual indulgence with her bachelor tenant Shrikrishna ji. The mother feels abandoned after the death of her husband. She cannot endure loneliness. So just a sneaky smile of friendship could melt her down in Shrikrishna ji arms after a few or many visits. She wants him primarily for sexual mating and not for financial and social support. Her relationship with the shopkeeper is bereft of any love and commitment. Like the honey-bee, she also wants to explore her identity by the relentless use of Shrikrishna ji’s masculinity.

Pahari widows are not constrained by widowhood and routinely remarry. Gokhale’s Pahari widow satisfies her sexual needs through her piecemeal relationship with the tenant. Chanana views, “Parvati’s mother as a sexually liberated woman who, despite her conservative lower middle class background, enjoys her drink and delves into the flesh” (163-64). Like the drone, Shrikrishna ji provides sexual gratification for a period and then vanishes. Possessed with a sense of desolation, “She began to look as she had used to the lines around her eyes returned, and she was suddenly older, thinner more fragile than she had even been” (19). It is soon diagnosed that she suffers from tuberculosis and she dies in a miserable situation. Thus, unlike male bee, it is she who is destined with a tragic end in the efforts of sexual rendezvous.

The mother’s sexual freedom has a deep impact on Parvati and becomes the turning point in her life. City life attracts Parvati. She plunges in dreams of the colourful life in the city. Parvati orphaned in adolescence and accustomed to poverty, is adopted by her mother’s step brother. He is the only living, distant relative to her mother, known as Masterji. He is unmarried and is the headmaster of a school in Nainital. Life with her uncle in the house
smelling of richness and comforts promises space for freedom. Munnibee, the Muslim maid servant in the house wears no mask. Parvati senses that the house is free of religio-social restraints. She has no guardian to fear and no servant to betray. She finds it to be a place suitable to convert her fantasy into actuality. The desire to appear physically inviting drives her to the world of cosmetics.

Education in the largest sense is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual. So Masterji puts Parvati in GGIC to continue her studies and appoints Salman, a very handsome young Muslim teacher as her tutor at home. On seeing Salman, Parvati appreciates his sensuality. “I first saw Salman, and I was dazzled by his beauty” (23). Females tend to prefer men for their masculinity, social security and financial support and men choose their mates based on their beauty. But Parvati is unconventional in her attitude to masculinity. She is carried away by her tutor’s handsomeness. She busies herself with love-making rather than studying. Salman seems to enjoy teaching her history almost as much as kissing her. He teaches her to fly far beyond the mountain peaks.

The institution of marriage begins to lose its significance as the modern youth find it not a disgrace for a guy and a girl to live together without tying the marriage knot. Parvati like her mother, keeps the affair with her tutor without any emotion of love or commitment to marriage. She refuses to assign the traditional role of a provider to Salman and quite uncharacteristically views him only as a sexual partner. She looks upon men as just partners and not providers. Without any fear of social stigma she intentionally loses her virginity to Salman. She suffers no prick of guilt or pang of remorse. Her emotionally liberated self knows well that she is moving towards disaster and Salman is not what he looks. The very knowledge fills her with the strength to resist the sexual restraints imposed by patriarchy. Parvati reports, “I could immediately sense that Salman wore a mask, but the knowledge excited and challenged me” (23).

As a drone vanishes after copulation, Salman too disappears from Parvati’s life. Munnibee the maid servant brings further information about an Anglo-Indian nurse who is depressed having been deserted by Salman. In her depression, she has slashed her wrists and her condition is critical. Salman’s relationship with other females is not questioned by Parvati. She rather delves in the sexual delight provided by Salman. Sharma comments, “When a ray of brief happiness touches her she is taken aback but quickly learns the art of love in the same skilful manner she had dealt with her despair” (“Echo of a Tragic Love”) (25). Salman’s departure leaves no sign of woe in Parvathi. She turns to her studies, visits
theatre and flirts with Mukul, her uncle’s favourite. Parvati’s violation of the ethical codes, speaks of her sexually perverted state and her sensibility not to despair and destroy herself.

Arranged marriages have been an integral part of the Indian society since ages. The bride and the groom are neither asked for their consent nor are they informed about the partner. Following tradition, Masterji arranges a marriage for Parvati when she is twenty. He is very particular about the matching of horoscopes. The background of the guy’s family and the caste are his other concerns. He decides on Lalit Joshi as his horoscope matches with that of Parvati and also because he belongs to the same sect of the Brahmin community.

Lalit Joshi is one of Mukul’s best friends. Parvati does not have the courage to contradict Masterji and his decision. She has to concede to her uncle’s choice. The most important decision of her life has been taken by someone else and she has to succumb to it. Lalit, with whom Parvati unities in marriage is an ailing man, whose homosexuality deprives Parvati of the sweetness of life. Homosexuality is largely seen as a taboo, a stigma and a symbol of weakness. Deepest depression takes hold of Parvati right from her wedding night. She confesses, “My husband looked puzzled, even oppressed, and kept stubborn, watchful distance from me” (33). After the sexual bliss from Salman and the joy of flirtation with Mukul, sexual life with Lalit looks empty and she spends her day in seclusion. The Indian society does not approve of homosexuality. Hence Lalit is forced to marry Parvati and consequently he ruins his life as well as that of Parvati’s.

The object of Lalit’s love is Mukul, who has meanwhile fallen in love with Parvati. So Lalit feels jealous of Parvati. She is horrified at the disclosure:

...I was indeed surprised to see the most undisguised jealousy in him. For a moment my spirit lifted. Then the truth registered, and I realized that I had blundered my way into a nightmare; for the jealousy was mixed with an expression of intense yearning, which was directed not towards me but Mukul.

(36)

Parvati tries to bridge the gap created by the lack of physical intimacy by cooking good food. But this conventional solution of bonding fails to replace the need for carnal pleasure. Parvati goes desperate and finds the company of mice and cockroaches less hostile than that of Lalit.

Extra-marital relationship fetches emotional gratification. Sexual incompatibility occurs when a couple does not share the appetite for sex. It is not cheating for love or attention but instead the desire to meet their sexual desires. The starved body and rejected soul of Parvati finds fulfillment in an incestuous relationship with her husband’s brother,
Raju. His presence keeps her sexually active. He serves merely as a tool for self-acceptance and self-assurance. Shankar sums up:

Parvati orphaned in adolescence and poverty, is adopted by her scholarly uncle. But she is married to an ailing man, whose homosexuality begins to destroy her. For her, who first discovered sex in joyous and passionate encounters, it becomes a reaching out to alleviate her obscure and terrible loneliness, where she begins to lose all sense of self. (“Review”)

The relationship with her brother-in-law gives Parvati a strange assurance and she has “learnt to love her husband” (45). This cultivated habit of loving her husband is again a reflection of the conventional mindset of the Indian society and the dual image of the patient wife and of the woman of misconduct.

Mental illness is a psychological pattern generally associated with subjective distress or disability that occurs in an individual. It is a well-known fact that sexual subjugation can lead to mental illness and Parvati’s madness is an instance. Lalit dies of tuberculosis and his brother Raju gets married to a daughter of a business man. Lalit’s death and Raju’s wedding mixed up together result in Parvati’s mental imbalance. Such situations are quite common in the Pahari community, “mental illness was like a secret rivulet through the genetic pools of Kumaon. No one is secure from its visitation” (137). Gokhale describes the mental ailment of not only Parvati but a whole generation of her female ancestors. Parvati’s insanity is the reflection of the inhuman treatment that she suffers at the hands of her homosexual husband and the society at large. Constant sexual denial and social indifference lead her to madness. Ultimately, she is abandoned by her devoted lover Mukul who leaves her in a lurch saying, “country and conditions do not permit” (20). Pande rightly judges, “And what could have been an astoundingly moving tale of human struggle for dignity in the midst of deprivation turns into something that moves between a poor joke and a pathetic whimper of romantic protest” (17).

Gokhale is able to indicate the role of caste, creed and cultural codes in determining and formulating sexual inclination through the character Mukul. He is an adorer of Parvati and yet is unable to marry her because they belong to different caste. Mukul is unable to form any fruitful relationship in the absence of Parvati and this makes him uncomfortable about his own sexuality. Parvati’s rejection fills him with a deep sense of insecurity because of which he feels that he is unloved and undesirable. He suffers from “unresolved childhood romance”
Mukul appears to be a victim of unrequited love trapped in several crises and a prey in the hands of Adeline, his sexual companion in Hong Kong.

In Western culture marriage is more a matter of money, power and survival than of delicate sentiments. Adeline is an Anglo Burmese. Following her husband’s death, she keeps physical relations with Mukul, Parvati’s ex-lover. Her sexual intimacy heals the pain and despair caused by his real love for Parvati. Though Adeliene still mourns her husband’s loss and wears his photograph to remember him always, she finds pleasure in the company of Mukul. Similarly, Mukul finds it comfortable to live with Adeliene, the widow and her daughter in Hong Kong. But still he cannot root out his thoughts of Parvati. This part of the novel contrasts with Parvati’s story. While Parvati’s sexual freedom ends in tragedy, Adeliene does not face any crisis because of her sexuality with Mukul. What is denied to Indian women is practiced freely by women of other culture. As Jain points out, “Sex is a part of life not a separate relationship which can be isolated from rest of life. Sex is no more just sex than food is just food” (58).

The feeling of despair, isolation and social inability leads Mukul to visit Rampa at late night. He finds her naked and continues aimlessly during his physical intimacy. Mukul feels ashamed of his activity whereas Rampa is fascinated and feels liberated sexually. Mukul recoils and prefers to leave the place after keeping money under her pillow. At that moment he hears a knock at the door. Her movements indicate that it must be a man at this time of the night. The reality that men are sexually abused by women is not widely accepted. Men always wanting and seeking sex with females is an accepted notion. If a female initiates sexual liberty with a male, this is viewed as a rare and exciting incident.

Gokhale tries to show the struggles of women to break the culturally imposed identity by asserting their sexual needs. Her portrayal of the insanity of Parvati, the tragic end of her mother, the sexual prowess of Adeliene and Pasang Rampa used merely as a tool to find a provider and the exhibition of homosexuality as a means to put a heterosexual woman in the margin show that the pattern of male privilege has not been completely broken. In the words of Shankar, “Parvati’s fall is the tale of million of Indian village women, who celebrate their sexuality and their silken dreams in the brief flowering of their first youth. Then their faces and lives become one doomed map of lines drawn by marriage and child birth” (“Review”).

The licentious story of Parvati and her mother, Adeliene and Pasang Rampa presents the reality that adulation of sensuality is not the monopoly of a man. Like a man, a woman also can pursue a man for the fulfillment of her sensual needs. Though the female desire is crucial
to the social fabric, it is recast and reformulated by men and the depiction of a truly sexually liberated woman is still a tantalizing dream.

Works Cited


