

# SHAPING A ROADMAP FOR VIKSIT BHARAT THROUGH LITERATURE BY STUDY OF SELECT REVISIONIST WRITINGS FROM POSTMODERN GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*Viksit Bharat, Towards Five Trillion Economy is not just about economic development of our nation but is also about literary development, as literature mirrors as well as influences and shapes our society. It is significant to note here that literature of ancient India such as The Ramayana and The Mahabharata though helped in making us understand our rich cultural and spiritual heritage it was written from patriarchally dominated perspective and thus contributed to constant production and perpetuation of the myth of gender stereotypes. The revisionist writings of developing Bharat by writers such as Iravati Karve, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Patnaik, Namita Gokhale and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni pointed out importance of writing back to the patriarchally dominated literary canon in order to understand gaps and silences in those canonized texts. The further pathway to enable India to achieve its monumental target of being Viksit nation, this paper argues, is by developing comprehensive approach towards study of these revisionist texts which this paper refers to as postmodern gender perspective. The aim of this paper thus is to elaborate on postmodern gender perspective and understand how it can be used to study revisionary texts. The two revisionary texts selected for this purpose are, Shakuntala The Play of Memory by Namita Gokhale which revises Kalidasa's Abhijan Shakuntalam and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Gokhale which revises Vyasa's Mahabharat.*

**Keywords:** revisionist text, postmodern gender perspective, literature, Viksit Bharat, comprehensive approach, literary canon

## INTRODUCTION

It is a widely acknowledged fact that without language there would be no literature and that literature reflects as well as influences and shapes our society. Viksit Bharat Towards Five Trillion Economy thus is not just about economic development but is also about literary development of our nation, It is pertinent to note that literature of ancient India though helped us in making us understand our rich cultural and spiritual heritage was written from patriarchally dominated perspective and thus contributed to constant production and perpetuation of the myth of gender stereotypes. The revisionist writings of these patriarchally dominated texts by writers of our developing nations such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Namita Gokhale, Kavita Kane, Iravati Karve and Devdutta Patnaik helped in deconstruction of these gender stereotypes. The further pathway to enable India to achieve its monumental target of being a developed nation, this paper argues is to have a comprehensive approach towards study of these revisionist writings, which this paper refers to as postmodern gender perspective. The aim of this paper is thus to explain postmodern gender perspective and enumerate its salient features. Further, in order to understand how postmodern gender perspective can be used to study the revisionary texts, this paper has selected two revisionary texts, *Shakuntala the Play of Memory* by Namita Gokhale which revises Kalidasa's *Abhijana Shakuntalam* and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which revises Vyasa's *Mahabharata*.

**Understanding Postmodern Gender Perspective and its Salient Features:** Jean Francois Lyotard, one of the early thinkers on postmodernism through his phenomenal work, *The Postmodern Condition* defined postmodern as "the incredulity towards metanarratives". According to Lyotard grand narratives or meta narratives are oppressive because in their attempt to be universal they prevent resistance and thus provide no scope for alternative perspective/s. Michel Foucault, another seminal figure of postmodernism through his thought provoking lectures and books pointed out that universal truth or narrative is produced by those in power and is used as a form of social control. Jacques Derrida, another influential figure of postmodernism through his theory of deconstruction pointed out the openness of all texts because of instability of language and unfinalizability of any meaning. All the three philosophers and thinkers of

postmodernism thus stressed the need to look at any text including history not as a totalizing narrative because any totalizing text seeks to homogenize differences in order to represent itself as universal truth.

Aligning themselves with postmodern thinkers, postmodern feminists along with gender theorists (collectively called as postmodern philosophers on gender for the purpose of this paper) such as Adrienne Rich bell hooks, Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell too challenged the epistemological foundation of grand narratives terming them as patriarchally dominated narratives. According to hooks women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking as men and thus we need to look at women's role in perpetuating patriarchal culture while analyzing the patriarchally cultured canonical narratives. Further, calling men as the "oppressors" and

women as the "oppressed," according to hooks results in silencing suffering of men under patriarchy. Adrienne Rich, another postmodern gender thinker through her seminal article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" challenged the patriarchally dominated literary canon as well as traditional feminism by calling attention to reinterpretation of canonical texts to recognize alternative female voice in the form of lesbian existence. Similarly, Judith Butler, one of the prominent postmodern gender thinker, through her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* pointed out constructedness of sex/gender binary and performative aspect of gender. Further, Raewyn Connel, another renowned postmodern gender philosopher, through her pioneering work *Masculinities* pointed out the need to study canonical narratives by analyzing patriarchally cultured masculinity in its plural form and also understand the importance of hegemonic or dominant masculinity along with alternate masculinity/ies.

Postmodern gender perspective, the approach proposed by this paper towards study of revisionist writings is the amalgamation of above two approaches: postmodernism with its emphasis on non-universalization of any claim and postmodern gender philosophers' insistence on inclusivity in terms of gender oppression as well as gender power and on looking at gender in its plural form and from performativity aspect. The other important features of postmodern gender perspective can be enumerated as below:

- Gender is a term which is applicable to both men and women.
- Gender need to be historicized. In other words, gender should be studied by taking into account the historical context, prevalent ideology, religion and culture of the era as well as other significant factors such as race, caste and class which intersected and shaped gender norms of the era.
- A firm belief that gender attributes as well as dichotomy of sex are produced, reproduced and thus naturalized from early childhood.
- Looks at gender as a "situation" and a process. In other words, becoming a gender is not natural but a process of either conforming to the traditional gender norms or resisting the norms to expose the constructedness of gender.
- Problematizes the myth of motherhood and exposes that there is nothing inherent about being a mother.
- Insistence and recognition of lesbian and homosexual identity as part of sexual practice.
- Recognition of caring masculinity or supportive patriarchs and patriarchal women
- Importance to study situational power/agency .

#### **Study of Shakuntala the Play of Memory by Namita Gokhale to understand its analyzation from postmodern gender perspective:**

Namita Gokhale's novel *Shakuntala The Play of Memory* revisits and revisions *Abhijana Shakuntalam* of Kalidasa by way of reimagining Shakuntala not as a woman of divine birth who obediently accepts her fate and goes through samskaras of abandonment but as a bold, wild, free-spirited hilly girl of early medieval India who willingly abandon everything that she has in her desire to travel and to gain knowledge. Gokhale's thinking scholar fights the odds on her way in the form of religion, caste and gender in her desire to gain knowledge and like a wandering spirit sets on her journey towards self-discovery and successfully fulfils her dream to live life on her own terms. Gokhale has chosen eighth century India i.e., when Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta was challenging Buddhism and had become major force in terms of religious impact on culture as the backdrop of her revisionary novel. Through her male as well as female characters Gokhale also points out caste based hierarchy prevalent during the early medieval India and men and women as supporters as well as rebellions of this patriarchally cultured caste/gender binary. Through various priestly characters Gokhale has pointed out how religious patriarchy dominated the religious and cultural landscape of eighth century India. The other prominent male characters to appear in the novel are Srijan, the rich mahasamant who is propagator of dominant gender binary and Nearchus, a Greek soldier who is representative of liberal gender binary. Thus, Gokhale's novel is not just focussed on Shakuntala and her struggle to be a wandering philosopher but is also focussed on the then dominant religious patriarchy.

After taking into account the historical era, the hierarchical division of society based on caste system, patriarchal women, a scholarly first person narrator wishing to be a wandering philosopher and diverse

religious masculinities as portrayed in the novel, this paper strongly suggests that Gokhale's revisionary novel can be studied from postmodern gender perspective as follows :

- Shakuntala: Shakuntala needs to be studied as a restless woman scholar who dared to challenge patriarchy to live life on her own terms. In this section Shakuntala's subversive performativity to fulfil the desire of her "self" against the brahminical religious patriarchy of the early medieval India can be studied.
- Bhikkunis and rock demoness versus a brahmin mother and a seductive handmaiden/rival woman: In this section significant minor female characters from Gokhale's Revisionary can be studied to understand their role as subverters and supporters of brahminically cultured religious patriarchy.
- Srijan and Nearchus: In this section Srijan and Nearchus the two patriarchs in Shakuntala's life can be studied in terms of their culturally contrasted gender performativity as portrayed in the novel.
- Priestly Masculinities: In this section diverse priestly masculinities from Gokhale's revisionary novel can be studied to understand the struggle of brahminical patriarchy to retain its hegemony through religion.

### **Analyzing The Palace of Illusions, a Revisionary Novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from Postmodern Gender Perspective:**

In Vyas's *Mahabharata* Draupadi's role is limited to the Swayamvar episode, her unusual position as wife of five Pandavas and her curse after the disrobing incident. Sensing the injustice done to the formidable woman scholar of the mytho-historical era, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, re-visions the *Mahabharat* by letting Draupadi fill the gaps of Vyasa's colossal epic through her first person narrativity. At the same time Divakaruni's novel not just focusses on Panchaali but also centers around prevalent patriarchy and its caste based hierarchical system, gender binary, patriarchal woman, toxic motherhood, hegemonic masculinity/ies and performative aspect of hegemonic gender with respect to emotional sensitivity of the characters. Through her revisionary novel and with Panchaali as the first person narrator Divakaruni thus points out how Drupad, Krishna, Kunti, Vyasa and Yudhistir as the representatives of hegemonic patriarchy continually tried to dominate Panchaali by exploiting her agency. However, instead of remaining victimized by the dominant patriarchs Panchaali decided to rebel against the hegemonic patriarchy after realizing her situational power. Divakaruni also does not glorify motherhood and in fact through the character of Kunti portrays her Machiavellian motherhood. Further, Divakaruni's revisionary novel also portrays male characters in terms of their hegemonic masculinity and its relation to emotional sensitivity. Last but not the least Divakaruni's revisionary novel also point out toxic masculinity through the character of Drona.

After taking into account the historical era, the hierarchical division of society based on caste system, dominant patriarchy and its gender binary, Machiavellian motherhood, diverse masculinities and position of warrior masculinity as the hegemonic model and toxicity of warrior masculinity as portrayed in Divakaruni's revisionary novel, this paper strongly proposes to study Divakaruni's revisionary novel from postmodern gender perspective by analyzing the characters as follows:

- Draupadi/Panchaali: Panchaali in Divakaruni's revisionary novel can be studied by historical analysis of mytho-epical Patriarchal gender binary to understand her journey as a princess/queen oppressed by dominant patriarchs and her eventual rebellion against them after recognizing her situational power.
- Kunti: Kunti's Machiavellian motherhood through which she secures and retains her positional power can be analyzed by historical analysis of mytho-epical Patriarchy.
- Drupad, Bheeshma, Duryodhan, Bheem and Arjun: Select kshatriya nobility from Divakaruni's revisionary novel can be studied by analyzing their emotional performativity as representatives of hegemonic masculinity.
- Dronacharya: Guru Dronacharya's toxic masculinity can be analyzed by examining his performativity as a revengeful brahmin friend, a highly prejudiced guru of warfare and a dangerously unrighteous warrior.

**Importance of Studying the above Revisionary Texts from Postmodern Gender Perspective:** As can be noted from the above chaptalization scheme, first and foremost, postmodern perspective on gender insists on studying the revisionary novels by historical analysis of patriarchy (religious, social, cultural and political) along with its notions of gender binary. Further, instead of looking at women as oppressed category postmodern gender perspective feels it important to also analyze their role as supporters of dominant patriarchy. Another significant aspect of studying the revisionary novels from postmodern gender perspective is that though the novels are written by female novelists with female first person narrators, the study is not just about female characters but with its insistence on comprehensive approach postmodern gender perspective gives equal importance to male characters from the novel. Thus, diverse masculinities, such as priestly masculinities, kshatriya masculinity, and Greek masculinity became focus of both the revisionary

novels. Further, as can be observed from Kunti's Machiavellian motherhood, postmodern gender perspective also does not glorify motherhood by studying it in a stereotypical approach.

## CONCLUSION

Postmodern gender perspective, as can be noted from above examination of revisionist novels, acts as a comprehensive approach to study of literature, especially study of revisionist writings which is the need of our nation in her journey towards Viksit Bharat. With its insistence on historical analysis of gender, postmodern gender perspective expands the limitations of other approaches towards study of literature such as Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, psychoanalytical criticism as well as deconstructive criticism as is pointed out by examining the selected revisionary texts. This paper thus through elaboration on postmodern gender perspective and its application in examining the revisionary text points out that in order to realize dream of Viksit Bharat in terms of literary development it is important to analyze revisionist writings from postmodern gender perspective.

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