

Life after Acid Attack: A Study of Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* in Feministic Perspective

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Abstract

An acid assault can have a catastrophic, psychological effect since the survivors frequently experience social isolation, shame, and terror. Furthermore, the physical wounds that remain may act as continual reminders of the horrific experience, making it extremely complicated for the survivors to go on with their lives and reclaim their self-worth. Namita Gokhale's novel *The Book of Shadows* (1999) addresses topics of survival as well as the necessity of self-discovery and healing in the face of trauma. The protagonist Rachita Tiwari, an acid attack survivor, finds solace in returning to her childhood home situated in the Himalayan hills. The most important reason for her return to her ancestral house is to find a suitable replacement and move into another realm to fill the void. In this book, the novelist addresses the issue of survival, which is rife with fantasies that are utterly disconnected from reality. Gokhale's literary work delves into the harsh truths of modern society, looking into the nature of reality, love, and faith. The author's portrayal of the protagonist's emotional turmoil and eventual healing process is both poignant and inspiring, making this a must-read for anyone looking for a powerful story of resilience and redemption. The paper uses feminism as a methodology to study the character's journey and examines the upsetting incidents that cause the protagonist to lose faith in humanity and how she eventually learns to find hope and meaning in life again.

Keywords: Acid attack; Alienation; Women; Illusion; Trauma.

Introduction

Acid throwing, physical torture, mental abuse, sexual exploitation, rape,

human trafficking, domestic violence, forced marriages, deaths, and other forms of financial and psychological oppression are all included in the category of gender-based violence. Violence against women is a serious issue that affects women of all ages, races, and socio-economic backgrounds. It is a violation of human rights and has long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological effects on the victims. Acid attack has several other labels that should be mentioned: acid throwing, chemical attack, corrosive substance crime, and chemical attack. A toxic liquid is hurled on the victims' faces in this deadly and brutal attack. In the majority of cases, the victims of this type of abuse are women. It alters not only a person's outward appearance but also how they are seen by others. We must recognise acid violence against women as a serious issue that must be discussed and addressed in India, where it is estimated that around three hundred acid attacks occur each year, with the majority of victims being women who have been attacked as a form of retaliation or punishment. Acid attacks on women are terrible crimes in India that frequently leave victims with significant physical and emotional scars. Despite efforts to curtail the heinous activity, acid assaults continue to occur, emphasising the need for increased awareness and tougher regulations to protect women. Acid attacks not only cause physical harm but also have long-lasting psychological effects on the victims, who often face social stigma and discrimination. It is important for society to come together to support the survivors and work towards preventing such crimes from happening in the first place.

Feminism is a socio-political movement that advocates for gender equality and the recognition of women's rights. This movement has historically focused on addressing systemic gender-based discrimination and oppression in areas such as politics, society, the workplace, education, and reproductive rights. Feminism addresses the issue of women's subordinate status in society and attempts to find remedies to the economic, social, cultural, and political discrimination that women face. Moreover, the various approaches to this fundamental problem add to feminism's complexity, diversity, fragmentation, and contradictions. The portrayal of violence against women in Indian literature has been a topic of debate and criticism for decades. Some argue that it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal norms, while others contend that it is a reflection of the harsh realities faced by women in Indian society. Nonetheless, there is a growing movement towards more nuanced and empowering depictions of women in literature.

Namita Gokhale is an acclaimed Indian writer, editor, film critic, festival director, and publisher. Her debut novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, was

released in 1984. She has authored nonfiction books, short stories, travel essays, and novels. She has received the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for *Things to Leave Behind* in 2021. She has encountered several obstacles on her quest for achievement. By the time she was forty, she had been given a cancer diagnosis and had to deal with her husband's unexpected death. She frequently conveys the isolation, detachment from reality and the world that many people experience through her novels. Despite all these challenges, she managed to turn her pain into inspiration and wrote several best-selling books that have touched the hearts of many readers. She is an excellent role model for those attempting to overcome hurdles that deplete their dreams and confidence. Her works are a testament to the power of resilience and determination in overcoming adversity. Namita Gokhale's empowering and resilient female characters serve as symbols of hope and resilience. Through their journeys, they demonstrate the power of self-discovery and overcoming societal constraints. These characters encourage women to break free from oppressive norms, highlighting the possibility of change despite adversity. In *Fiction of Namita Gokhale: A Critical Study*, Vandana Bhagdikar remarks, "Women characters in Namita Gokhale's novels have met with different experiences in their struggle towards emancipation, empowerment and search for identity. Some of them meet tragic death or rejoin their husbands or get ready to face the world alone without the support of men in their lives" (55). This observation by Bhagdikar sheds light on the themes of women's empowerment and identity in Gokhale's fiction, which are likely to resonate with the protagonist's journey in her professional and personal life. It would be interesting to see how the protagonist's story unfolds in light of these themes.

Namita Gokhale's writings frequently depict women's suppressed desires and sexuality. Her writing style is known for its boldness and honesty, as she fearlessly explores taboo topics and sheds light on the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Her works have been praised for their thought-provoking themes and vivid portrayals of women characters. The protagonist of her novel *The Book of Shadows* is Rachita Tiwari who is thirty-four years old and working as an English professor at Jesus and Mary College in Delhi. Her lustful relationship with her best friend's husband eventually culminates in the death of her fiancé Anand. His suicide has completely turned her life upside down. The events of the characters serve as a cautionary tale about the power of desire and the repercussions of giving in to it. Anand's sister, who works as a chemistry professor at the same college, is vengefully punishing her by throwing a beaker full of acid on her face when she is in the restroom. Rachita remembers the day on

which she was avenged for her fiancé's death. She describes the way the acid has changed her physical beauty. The physical changes she has experienced have left her feeling disconnected from her own body and identity. It is a difficult and isolating experience that has forced her to confront the fragility of the human form. She explains the tragic memories, "The acid had worked on the bone cartilage, and the surgeon has been cautious in his restorations. I have not looked into a mirror for months now, and my face, that familiar index of my being, has dissolved into absurdity and abstraction. Even my fingers do not recognize the changed contours of my cheeks, of the injured flesh" (7).

As usual, the press and media make this incident so popular among the people by dramatically sensationalizing the story, without considering the emotional toll it has taken on the victim. Rachita remembers:

The press took a morbid interest in all that had happened in the course of that summer madness. Pictures of my face as it had been stared back at me from everywhere. Reality pressed upon me with the weight of the unshed August clouds, it confronted me in the eyes of strangers, it afforded me on relief in that crowded relentless city I had once called my home. (6)

It is important to remember that behind every news headline, there is a real person with real feelings and struggles. Rachita shares that she is "forgotten as a person by the world, remembered only as a sensational story" (65). People arrive with their own interpretations of the victim and the situation. In the novel, she is portrayed as a victim of the opinions of the male-dominated society. The story delves at the ways in which society's expectations and pressures lead to victim-blaming, intensifying the survivor's sense of shame and loneliness. The author draws attention to these negative sentiments and emphasizes the need for an environment that is more understanding and encouraging, elevating survivors rather than prolonging their pain. Manoj Kumar in his article "Acid Violence against Women - A Study of Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*" says,

In India we worship woman as a deity. It's very pathetic that some people make her victim of their greed or jealousy. The victims of acid attack face a lifetime of discrimination from society and they become lonely. They are humiliated that people may stare or laugh at them. Because of this they hesitate to leave their homes fearing an adverse reaction from the outside world. The same case happens with the protagonist of the novel. An utterly

broken Rachita feels that all love and happiness are no more than mirage. (Kumar)

Rachita has asked herself a philosophical question: "Who am I?" (3). From this question we can understand her inability to accept her new physical appearance after her confrontation with the acid attack. Rachita's struggle with self-identity and body image is a common issue faced by many individuals, especially those who have experienced trauma or significant life changes. The faces that people perceive in the mirror serve as their own definitions. The face is important for one to identify oneself. In her case, all the parameters have changed. She thinks that all the doors to self-acknowledgment are banging shut upon her. She can't even accept her own image, so she even covers her face with muslin chunni from being seen by others. She struggles with self-awareness and self-acceptance, feeling like she is being hindered by everything and unable to accept the image she sees in the mirror. Even when she has been in the hospital, she has been kept away from the mirror. The hospital staff has covered all the mirrors and glasses with tape. Because they believe that seeing her reflection may negatively impact her mental health and recovery. She shares how she was restricted from seeing her own reflection, "My face had been banished from memory. Even in the bathroom they had taped up the mirror so that all I could see when I brushed my teeth in the mornings was a white sheet of paper that flapped faintly when the exhaust fan near the window (the barred window) was switched on" (21).

Rachita perceives a lack of connection between her life and the new setting. Delhi appears to be in a wilderness of anguish and pain once she is released from the hospital. Her reflection is a reminder of her illness and the difficult time she has been through. The emotional turmoil she is experiencing may be contributing to her feelings of being lost in the wilderness. She has to keep herself away from things and people in order to heal from heartbreak and pain. So, she moves to an old house in Ranikhet, where she has only an old servant called Lohaniju to take care of her. She is very troubled and traumatized by the tragedies that have occurred in her life. She withdraws herself from society, just like other people would. The choice to hide oneself from others' recognition is reflected in her turn towards her ancestral home. The author portrays the impacted woman's thoughts as it actually is. The main character frequently says, "I belong to this house, as this house belongs to me" (3). We can see from her statement how she identifies with the house and places all of her hopes in it since she knows it cannot harm her like others do. The author skilfully captures the woman's strong emotional bond with her home while underlining the

significant influence trauma may have on a person's sense of identity and belonging.

Alienation is a feeling of loneliness or isolation from someone or something, often caused by rootlessness and loss of identity. Rachita, who is connected to Anand, experiences loneliness, cultural estrangement, abnormality, social isolation, and lack of commitment due to her connection. This alienation exacerbates her struggle to find her place in the world, leading to increased disconnection from society and difficulty in forming meaningful relationships or feeling a sense of belonging. She defines alienation in her notebook: "Words like alienation belong to the context of psychopathology. All human beings harbour their particular and individual manifestations of the Other. In the widest sense, every neurosis is the outcome of some form of alienation" (63). This means that feeling disconnected or isolated from oneself or others can lead to psychological distress and mental illness. It is important for individuals to recognize and address these feelings in order to promote overall well-being. She alienates herself from the male dominated society and reasons her decision to take shelter in that house by saying "to heal, to hide, to forget" (6). Generally affected people take refuge in things rather than humans. Objects offer stability, familiarity, comfort, and security, providing a sense of control in a chaotic and unpredictable world, a sense that may be lacking in human relationships.

Rachita is a mere body that inhales and exhales. She has adapted to the secret pockets of pain, hope, and expectation. Her return to her hometown serves as the impetus for erasing her past and embracing the present. She then receives a visit from her past. The memories of her past haunt her, making it difficult for her to fully embrace the present. She explains her tragic state, "Just last term in linear time, but linear time has retreated from my life, it remains suspended by an oblong noose of the rope hanging from a ceiling fan, a cicada chirruping in the woodwork breaking the heavy silence with its insistent trills as the grotesque figure of my fiancé, Anand, swung gently in the centre of that empty room" (4). Memories play an important role in the life of every person, here in the novel also the unlikable events that occurred in her life chains her with the past. N. Radha and Dr. M. Premavathy in their research article highlight, "Memories plunge in, often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini-story, a fiction in itself, imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative" (688). The memories unfold the events to give the detailed narrative of the events and state of the protagonist's mind.

Rachita had no fear when she was young because she had a hidden reservoir of fortitude and trust that she could draw on whenever she needed it. At present, her river of brave has not shown when she struggles to bring her up to encounter her fears and problems. Even though she is being treated with antibiotics and anxiolytics, she still experiences acute anxiety episodes and feels dizzy and faint as a result sometimes. She is afraid to go to sleep with her eyes closed. As she closes her eyes, the vision of Anand's sister being confronted with something beyond rage or hatred repeatedly appears in her dream. The trauma has caused her to develop insomnia and she often wakes up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. She shares, "Sleep and dream and awakening merged into a circular connectedness" (212). Despite seeking therapy, she still struggles to come to terms with the event and its impact on her life. She is later haunted by the image of a girl without a face while sleeping. As a victim of an acid attack, she is incapable of escaping the results and consequences of the incident. The protagonist's fear of her own disfigured face is further exacerbated by the recurring nightmare she experiences. The trauma of the acid attack continues to haunt her, affecting her daily life and mental state. She explains, "This morning, as I brushed my teeth, I evaded my face in the mirror as I normally do, but there was a new dimension to my horror and repugnance, for it had struck me that the face I saw in my dreams last night was really my own" (24). Through the statement we can understand that the new disfigured face and identity disturbs her severely which comes in her dream often.

Rachita spends her time reading books that have been found in the old mansion. In such reading, she agrees with Plato's plan to exclude poets from his new world because she also thinks that poets are liars, which is the result of her bitter experiences. She finds solace in stories with predictable happy endings, as they offer a sense of control and comfort. She likes to read stories with happy endings, but she abandons them halfway through when the union of lovers comes. "I wasn't ready for the bit where the Prince asks the Princess to marry him" (17). All women aspire to have a life brimming with love. Women are no different from men when it comes to the basic human urge for love. Every woman has a deep-seated yearning for love and friendship, which is seen in everything from romantic comedies to fairy tales. They frequently seek out significant connections and create gratifying relationships throughout their lives as a result of this yearning. Her relationship with Anand, however, makes her reject traditional notions of relationships. Her hatred of happy-ending tales is due to her past love, who committed suicide. The tragic event left her with a deep scar, making her unable to appreciate literary work and its ability

to evoke emotions.

Rachita has forced herself to read William James Cockerell's Indian Journal whose author built the ancient wooden house. The journal chronicles the gradual loss of mental stability of a man who was probably not that sane to begin with. In the following days she encounters the supernatural elements and narratives of the ghost about the history of the mansion and people who lived in that place. She has indulged in that situation for sometimes. She thinks all the characters she meets in the mansion except Lohaniju are from the past and real. She says, "I'm tuned into something I don't understand. I keep trying to trip myself up, to break into the rationale of these hallucinations, but I swear I do actually see them, they materialize and 'derealize' like something out of a science-fiction film" (67). The confused state of her mind is the result of the tragic event; many victims in isolation engage themselves in such activities. She attempts to escape the situation by engaging in other activities in between phases of her mental illness.

The protagonist's complexion and hair change colour due to her repeated exposure to the sun's rays while admiring the beauty of the mountains. Rather than accepting social judgment, she chooses to embrace the tranquillity of nature and finds solace and healing there. This incident emphasizes how important it is to foster acceptance and tolerance in order to create a society where people are free to express their true selves without fear of discrimination. The relationship that the protagonist has with nature teaches us the importance of understanding and tolerance. She has vowed to practise meticulous personal grooming to improve her mental health in a progressive way. She routinely paints her nails with various coloured polishes in an effort to forget bad memories. She even thinks that each colour has a deeper significance. Red denotes danger or aggression, whereas pink denotes love. She even says, "Sanity is like nail polish, it chips easily, it has to be restored and renewed" (19). She changes her nail polish every two days because she hasn't seen her face for quite some time to keep her away from fall into depression. It's far too simple to slide into emotional and physical decline. By comparing sanity to nail polish, the speaker emphasises the importance of taking care of oneself. She recognises that maintaining one's mental health requires constant effort and attention, just like keeping one's appearance well-groomed. She also follows several drills to maintain her mental wellness. She cannot sleep at night due to an anxiety attack, so she makes the decision to read books all night. She shares her methods to avoid unwanted thinking. "I play solitaire, I knit, I redo my nail polish, and as a last resort I count and

recount the rafters" (24).

Rachita accepts that she is constantly changing and reinventing herself in order to survive. She is now aware of what she should keep and what she should throw away. Only when she begins to move with enough courage and tenacity towards a positive value of life does her symbolic importance become clear. She has come to the realisation the following:

It is not my body which has betrayed me-it is I who have betrayed this body. My abandonment of courage has been no less treacherous than Anand's. Courage is not simply a virtue - it is the testing point of all virtues at the highest conflux of reality. I will not fail this test of courage-I will venture unafraid into the future, with my body, with my mind, with my spirit. (219)

Slowly, she is recovering from the hallucinations, synaesthesia, and hysteria. She is unsure of the veracity of Dona Rosa and the other characters she has met in the house because she has been in a state of confusion. They are weak, evasive, and ambiguous remnants of the past. She has come to terms with the fact that her mind has been playing tricks on her due to the trauma she experienced in the past and is now determined to seek professional help to fully overcome her condition. She accepts Lata's idea of getting help from Dr. Bhatia. She tells him that she can see things that aren't there or things that can't be seen by others. His reply is, "Well, in conditions of sensory isolation, the human input channels tend to become filled with discordant signals. In common language, people begin to hallucinate" (220). He tries to explain her condition scientifically, but she later knows that what she sees is real. When she learns about the plastic surgery from her sister, her level of confidence has started increasing. She plans to go back to city to continue her job with courage after her student Zenobia encourages her to face the world. She foresees her future:

The world outside is full of change, and I do not know if these memories can endure. This hillside will remain, as will the snow mountains that watch over us, even if nothing else does. The garden will bloom again, the roses by the veranda, the weeds and forget-me-nots by the gravel path. I think I know that I will remain. (232)

The protagonist is uncertain about the validity of her past memories in her current home, but finds solace in the hillside and snow-capped mountains, the garden's resurgence, and the belief that despite the changes, she

will remain steadfast. Dr. J. Jesu Latha observes the empowerment of the protagonist:

Rachita is the representative of modern women who search for an authentic selfhood and simultaneously understands the existential problems of life. After coming to the old house, Rachita accepts her displacement and marginalization as a woman, remembers her past but she does not fail to recognize her true self as well. She undergoes different stages from innocence to experience like Sri. Aurobindo's *Savitri*. (131)

The main character's life has been filled with a variety of experiences, stories, and situations that have given her the strength to rise beyond her miserable situation. She changes and becomes a new woman who is eager to look forward to the future. Rachita's positive transformation is inspiring women who struggle and are suppressed by a culture controlled by men.

Conclusion

She experienced an identity crisis following the acid attack, but because the woman is an embodiment of power, she slowly but surely managed to recover. This is the power of a new woman who challenges the notion of womanhood, traditionally regarded as the weaker sex. The majority of women who survive an acid attack commit suicide because they are unable to face the shame and rejection from society. Rachita has the strength to escape the catastrophe on her own, and her will to live is unimaginable. Rachita's self-awareness helps the novel progress in a direction that is supportive of women's existence in the world. Rachita's story is a powerful example of resilience and determination, inspiring women to break free from societal expectations and reclaim their agency. Her journey towards healing and self-acceptance is a testament to the transformative power of self-love and community support. Our perspective on women has changed significantly as a result of the growth of feminist thought. A new generation of women writers has emerged, who are challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for gender equality. Their works have contributed to a shift in societal attitudes towards women and empowered women to speak out against oppression and discrimination.

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