

Postcolonial Identity and Cultural Hybridity in Namita Gokhale's Fiction

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Abstract: Namita Gokhale's fiction, spanning four decades from *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) to *Things to Leave Behind* (2016), consistently returns to the condition of living between worlds: between English and vernacular idiom, metropolitan modernity and Himalayan tradition, inherited myth and lived experience, colonial history and postcolonial self-fashioning. This paper argues that Gokhale's oeuvre offers a sustained meditation on postcolonial identity as an experience of cultural hybridity rather than of clean rupture or return. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity and the "third space," alongside feminist postcolonial criticism, the paper traces this hybridity across three registers in Gokhale's work: linguistic hybridity, most visible in the Hinglish idiom of *Paro* and *Priya*; mythic hybridity, in which ancient narrative is reworked to speak to contemporary anxieties in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* and *The Book of Shadows*; and historical hybridity, in which the colonial encounter itself becomes the ground on which identity is contested in *Things to Leave Behind*. Across these registers, Gokhale's women protagonists, *Paro*, *Priya*, *Rachita*, *Shakuntala*, and *Tilottama*, are shown to negotiate rather than resolve the contradictions of their inheritance, producing a model of postcolonial Indian identity that is plural, unfinished, and resistant to singular definition.

Keywords: *Postcolonial identity, cultural hybridity, Hinglish, myth, Himalaya.*

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Introduction

Namita Gokhale occupies an unusual position in contemporary Indian writing in English: a novelist, editor, and publisher whose career, beginning with the succès de scandale of *Paro: Dreams of Passion* in 1984 and extending through *A Himalayan Love Story*, *The Book of Shadows*, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, *Priya: In Incredible Indya*, and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning *Things to Leave Behind*, has repeatedly staged the encounter between inherited tradition and unsettled modernity. Born in Lucknow and raised largely in Nainital, Gokhale writes from a doubled vantage point, at once cosmopolitan and regional, urban and Himalayan, that recurs as a structuring tension across her fiction. This paper argues that what unifies this otherwise diverse body of work, satirical social comedy, Gothic romance, mythic retelling, and historical epic, is a consistent preoccupation with hybridity as the fundamental condition of postcolonial Indian identity.

Hybridity, in Homi Bhabha's influential formulation, names not a comfortable mixture of two discrete cultures but the unstable, generative space in which colonial and postcolonial subjects are compelled to fashion identity from fragments that do not cohere into a single, authoritative narrative. Gokhale's fiction dramatises this instability at multiple levels: in the language her characters speak, in the myths they inherit and revise, and in the historical memory that continues to shape gender, caste, and religious identity long after formal decolonisation. This paper examines three registers of hybridity in Gokhale's fiction, linguistic, mythic, and historical, before turning to the figure that recurs across all

three: the woman protagonist who neither fully rejects nor fully accepts her inheritance, but lives, often painfully, within its contradictions.

Theorising Hybridity in the Postcolonial Novel

Bhabha's concept of the "third space" describes a zone of enunciation in which the colonised subject's identity is produced neither by simple return to a precolonial past nor by assimilation into the coloniser's culture, but through a continual, unresolved negotiation between the two. This negotiation is not merely thematic; it is structural, visible in narrative form, register, and voice. Gokhale's fiction is instructive here because her formal experiments, code-switching between English and Hindi, juxtaposition of realist and Gothic modes, interpolation of myth into contemporary plot, enact hybridity at the level of style as much as content. Critics writing on her work have described this quality as a form of cultural bridging, in which Gokhale mediates between ancient Indian heritage and the complexities of urban modernity without reducing either term to the other. This paper extends that observation by arguing that Gokhale's hybridity is deliberately unresolved: her novels do not offer synthesis so much as they document the ongoing, often exhausting, labour of living between registers.

A second theoretical strand relevant to Gokhale's fiction is feminist postcolonial criticism's insistence that the postcolonial subject is never ungendered. Gayatri Spivak's foundational question of whether the subaltern can speak is especially pertinent to a writer whose protagonists are almost without exception

women navigating inheritance, marriage, and the constraints of family and caste. Gokhale's hybridity, in other words, is not an abstract condition but one lived concretely through female bodies, desires, and domestic negotiations, so that postcolonial identity in her fiction is inseparable from the politics of gender.

Linguistic Hybridity: Hinglish and the Comedy of Class

Gokhale's debut novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, remains the clearest instance of linguistic hybridity in her oeuvre. Narrated in a wry, self-deprecating English inflected throughout by Hindi idiom, slang, and syntax, the novel captures the speech of Delhi and Bombay's elite with a precision that is inseparable from social satire. This hybrid idiom, later termed Hinglish by reviewers and critics, is not merely comic colour; it enacts the very condition the novel describes, an urban Indian elite fluent in English yet never fully separated from vernacular habits of thought and expression. The narrator Priya, and later Paro herself in the 2011 sequel *Priya: In Incredible Indyya*, speak a language that refuses the purity of either English or Hindi, embodying a hybridity that is at once linguistic and social, since command of this idiom is itself a marker of class privilege within postcolonial India.

This linguistic hybridity carries a double edge. On one hand, it signals liberation: Paro's uninhibited sexuality and irreverent humour, expressed in this hybrid register, mount a challenge to the moral seriousness and reticence that had characterised earlier Indian English fiction. On the other hand, the very fluency that allows Priya and Paro to move between worlds is unavailable to less privileged characters within the same novels, who remain confined to more rigid social and linguistic positions. Gokhale's satire is thus double-directed, celebrating the comic possibilities of hybrid speech while remaining alert to the unequal distribution of the cultural capital that hybridity, in this register, requires.

Mythic Hybridity: Rewriting Shakuntala and the Ghosts of the Himalaya

A second, quite different register of hybridity appears in Gokhale's engagement with Indian myth. *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* retells the classical story of Shakuntala and King Dushyanta, familiar from Kalidasa's Sanskrit drama, through a modern narrative sensibility attentive to memory, desire, and female interiority. Rather than treating myth as a fixed inheritance to be reproduced, Gokhale rewrites it, inserting into the ancient narrative a psychological and sexual candour that belongs to the present even as the story's outward events remain rooted in received legend. This is myth-revising rather than myth-repeating: the postcolonial writer's relationship to inherited cultural narrative is shown to be active and transformative rather than merely custodial.

The *Book of Shadows* extends this hybridity into the Gothic mode. Its protagonist, Rachita Tewari, an English lecturer disfigured by an acid attack, retreats to a haunted house in the Himalayan foothills built originally by an English missionary, and the narrative that unfolds interweaves her contemporary trauma with the accumulated ghosts of the house's colonial and postcolonial occupants, an English planter, his Indian mistress, occult dabblers invoking Aleister Crowley, and Kumaoni folklore. The house itself becomes a hybrid structure in the most literal sense, colonial architecture inhabited by indigenous spirits, English ghost-story convention layered over Himalayan oral tradition. Rachita's psychological recovery is inseparable from her

negotiation with this layered, haunted inheritance; she cannot exorcise the house's colonial ghosts any more than she can escape her own trauma, and the novel's resolution, such as it is, comes through acknowledgment and coexistence rather than purification.

Across both novels, the Himalayan landscape functions as what one might call a memory-scape, a terrain in which regional identity is continually renegotiated against the homogenising pressures of metropolitan modernity and, before it, colonial administration. Gokhale's editorial work, including the anthology *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*, reinforces this same commitment to preserving regional and oral cultural forms within a literary tradition that might otherwise privilege only pan-Indian or cosmopolitan narratives.

Historical Hybridity: Colonial Memory in Things to Leave Behind

Gokhale's most sustained engagement with hybridity as a historical condition appears in *Things to Leave Behind*, set in Kumaon between 1840 and 1912. Here, hybridity is neither comic, as in *Paro*, nor Gothic, as in *The Book of Shadows*, but historical and political: characters negotiate conversion, caste, and colonial administration as competing claims on identity that cannot be resolved into a single allegiance. Tilottama Uprety's simultaneous immersion in Brahminical custom and appetite for English-language newspapers and reformist thought, her son-in-law Jayesh's conversion to Christianity, and the missionary Rosemary Bodden's own precarious position within colonial hierarchy together dramatise a colonial society in which no character occupies an unmixed cultural position. The novel's famous opening image, native women ritually purifying Naini Lake against the polluting presence of British rule, is itself hybrid in its ironies: the ritual asserts indigenous authority even as the lake's transformation into a colonial hill station, with its racially segregated roads, is already underway and, within the world of the novel, irreversible.

Reading *Things to Leave Behind* alongside Gokhale's earlier fiction reveals continuity rather than departure. The historical distance of the nineteenth century allows Gokhale to render explicit what her contemporary novels treat obliquely: that postcolonial Indian identity is built upon a foundation of unresolved hybridity extending back to, and beyond, the colonial encounter itself. Tilottama's defiance of both Brahminical restriction and colonial condescension anticipates Paro's defiance of bourgeois propriety and Rachita's negotiation with her haunted inheritance; in each case, Gokhale's protagonist survives not by achieving a pure, singular identity but by learning to inhabit contradiction.

Gokhale's Women: Living Between Worlds

What ultimately unifies Gokhale's treatment of hybridity across these registers is her consistent focus on women who must do the work of negotiation that hybridity demands. Paro's sensuality, Priya's exhausted negotiation of middle age and political marriage, Rachita's reckoning with trauma and inherited ghosts, *Shakuntala*'s re-imagined desire, and Tilottama's defiance of both colonial and patriarchal authority are all, in their different modes, instances of women compelled to reconcile incompatible demands, tradition and modernity, chastity and desire, indigenous custom and colonial or metropolitan aspiration, without the comfort of a resolved or singular identity. Gokhale's feminism, as critics have observed, is neither doctrinaire nor uniform across her novels; it is precisely this refusal of a single, programmatic model

of liberation that aligns her fiction with a broader postcolonial suspicion of totalising narratives, whether nationalist, religious, or colonial.

This is not to say that Gokhale's hybridity is celebratory in any simple sense. Her novels register real costs: Paro's story ends badly; Rachita's recovery is partial; Tilottama's defiance does not spare her daughter's coerced conversion. Hybridity, for Gokhale, is less a triumphant synthesis than a condition to be endured and, at best, worked with rather than against. This unsentimental quality distinguishes her fiction from more celebratory accounts of postcolonial hybridity and situates her closer to a tradition of postcolonial writing that insists on the ongoing, unfinished, and frequently painful character of identity formation after empire.

Conclusion

Read across her career, Namita Gokhale's fiction constitutes a sustained and evolving inquiry into what it means to hold a postcolonial Indian identity together from unmatched pieces: English and Hindi, myth and modern psychology, colonial history and indigenous memory, tradition and desire. Whether through the comic hybridity of Hinglish speech, the mythic hybridity of retold legend, or the historical hybridity of colonial Kumaon, Gokhale consistently refuses the fantasy of a pure, recoverable, precolonial identity as much as she refuses any complete absorption into a Westernised modernity. Her women protagonists, from Paro to Tilottama, model a postcolonial selfhood that is plural, provisional, and frequently costly, but also resourceful, resilient, and capable of reworking inherited material into new configurations of meaning. In this sense, Gokhale's fiction, taken as a whole, offers one of the most sustained literary explorations in contemporary Indian English writing of hybridity not as a theory to be illustrated but as a lived, gendered, and continually renegotiated condition of postcolonial identity.

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