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THE SILENCES OF HISTORY: EXAMINING HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN GOKHALE'S *THINGS TO LEAVE BEHIND*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to address the silences of main stream history on the plight of individuals during sweeping historical events. The paper will attempt to scrutinize the presence of historiographic metafiction in the novel *Things to Leave Behind* (2016) by Namita Gokhale. In the absence of any prominent protagonists, it is the multifaceted history of India that plays the key part in this book. The responses to the times of characters like Tilottama, Mary Jane, Jayesh and Deoki will be examined to show the way in which they shape (through their limited means) and become part of the course of history. The character of Tilottama is influenced by various historical figures like Pandita Ramabai, Anandi bai Joshi and Swami Vivekananda. Her response to them is significant in understanding the impact of those stalwarts on the lives of common people in that period. Tilottama's ambiguous response to the freedom movement mirrors the duality in the hearts of millions of Indians of that period. The way in which the postmodern technique of Intertextuality has been used in the novel will also be studied. Religious history will also be probed; the prejudice of Christians towards Hindus and the ambivalence of converted Christians towards both religions.

Keywords

Caste, Feminism, Historiographic Metafiction, Intertextuality, Postmodernism.

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The purpose of a novel is to tell a story that becomes the history of its characters. Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* (2016) weaves her story in the fabric of history. The days of sepoy mutiny is when the author begins her narrative. Various historical events are revisited through the character's perspectives. They contribute to the times and carry the voice of the times in their life. Unlike most novels there is not a single protagonist who the author chooses to helm the story with. Rather there are various entries and exits of multiple characters that leave the readers pondering. The novel becomes a historical treatise that examines the lives of the people who grappled with the times.

Postmodernism has taught us to question the grand narratives. History is the grand narrative that historiographic metafiction questions. The gaps in main stream history are what historiographic metafiction sets out to bridge. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Linda Hutcheon has elaborated on the concept of historiographic metafiction. She says:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ('exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination'). (Hutcheon, 1988, p.89)

What we study about the sepoy mutiny in history books is a mere recounting of hard facts. Gokhale delves deeper and offers us the account of the plight of an English woman who loses her entire family to the mutiny. We are introduced to the twenty-two-year-old Mary Jane Nestor whose husband William James Nestor, a corporal in the British horse artillery was hacked to pieces by the mutineers. When trouble broke out, she was sent with other English women and children to the security of Agra Fort. The mention of Agra Fort does not go unmarked by Gokhale as she intertwines the ancient history of the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb imprisoning his father Shah Jahan there. The past and the present intermingle as Shah Jahan's captivity echoes the prisoner like state of the widowed Mary Jane.

Mary Jane plotted her escape from Agra Fort as she felt threatened for the safety of her only surviving child, Eugene. With the help of a local woman Gulabo, dressed in Indian clothes she ventured out of the fort to secure the future of the last of her progeny. Gokhale once again delves into the historical episodes of King Shivaji who had escaped from Agra fort in a basket of sweets and that of Lord Krishna who had escaped from another fort, in Mathoor, near Agra to mark her brave adventure.

Mary Jane's resolve to save her son prompted her to jump into the Yamuna river from the capsizing boat. But in spite her heroic feat she failed as her son drowned. A magic realist atmosphere is evoked where Mary Jane had a vision of Jesus who carried off her dead child and said that her time had not yet come. She was found in the crematorium by a band of sadhus to whom her appearance was a mystical occurrence. They equated her appearance from the funeral pyre to that of Goddess Kali. They asked her will. She replied that she wanted to go to the hills. They unquestioningly took her along with them. All through her journey horrific details of the fate of the English men and women at the hands of the mutineers reached Mary Jane but she remained resolute in choosing not to abandon her mission.

The terrors of the mutiny had not yet subsided, and Mary Jane would overhear excited stories of Englishmen murdered and mutilated. Yet her stubborn spirit did not reflect on whether she had been wise in escaping the relative safety of Agra Fort. 'I have a mission,' she told herself. 'I have a message.' (Gokhale, 2016, 87)

Mary Jane was just one example of the victims of sepoy mutiny. Gokhale recounts the horrors of the mutiny on other English women and children as she talks about the Satichura Ghat massacre where 300 English men, women and children were executed. The Indian humane aspect of this historical event is also recounted during the narrative. Gokhale notes how the voices of women were silenced when they tried to protest against the violence against English women and children. "But the women's voices carried little weight and vengeance prevailed." (Gokhale, 31)

Historical personalities are also invoked by Gokhale during the course of the narrative. The readers are informed about the views of Karl Marx on the subsequent carnage of the sepoy mutiny. His voice offers a sane view on the unreasonable violence partaken of both by the Indians and their English masters. He opines in the *New-York Daily Tribune*:

It should not be forgotten that, while the cruelties of the English are related as acts of martial vigour...the outrages of the natives, shocking as they are, are still deliberately exaggerated. (Gokhale, 2016, 32)

The sepoy mutiny was a twin edged sword. It took lives not only of the British but that of rebellious Indians as well. The rebel Badri Dutt Uprety's public execution is a case in point. He had an alliance with rebellious Indian noblemen like Anand Singh Phartyal and Bishan Singh Karavat and was often known to vent his disrespect for the British rule publicly. His public execution was elaborately planned by Commissioner Henry Ramsay to strike a terror to rebellious hearts. He observed, "We must not, at any cost, create martyrs." (Gokhale, 36)

The winds of change blowing through India were embraced by Badri Dutt's niece Tilottama, the independent minded daughter of Durga Devi, an eccentric artist. The events that motivate her were enumerated by Gokhale. The setting up of the Allahabad University; The first Indian woman Cornelia Sorabjee to graduate; Anandibai Joshi, the

first Indian woman physician to practice and above all the publication of path breaking treatise by Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*.

...Pandita Ramabai's flouting of every high-caste taboo, her empowerment through education, her defiant inter-caste marriage to Medhvi, her training as a teacher in England and her sojourns to distant lands----these tales all held Tilottama in thrall. (Gokhale, 2016, 107)

Tilottama was a contradictory woman. Her mind wanted to rebel yet her traditional upbringing forbade her to take any drastic step. For example, she did not dare to venture into the market place or the main thoroughfare of Almora town on her own. On the question of her daughter's marriage at a tender age she put her foot down. She protested that she wanted to educate her daughter but on meeting stiff resistance from her husband she acceded to her husband's wishes.

Tilottama's eccentricity and her relation to the times are underscored in her interaction with Swami Vivekananda. Her brief interaction with him gives the readers an insight into the common woman's understanding of his philosophy and world view. In other words, Vivekananda is brought down from his high pedestal and scrutinized by the limited worldview of a self-educated woman. She ventured to ask the saint, the meaning of freedom. To her limited pool of experiences freedom was getting the opportunity to 'chew tobacco' or 'smoke cigars'. When the saint confronted her with the question that whether she would let her children partake of such activities Tilottama candidly declared to the utter consternation of the entire assembly, "Thank God you are not God!" (Gokhale, 128). In her eyes Swami Vivekananda became ordinary when he prohibited the use of the customarily forbidden items. To her, Godliness therefore was something that rose above all sorts of strictures of society.

The issue of tobacco use and equating it to freedom is again taken up in the concluding pages of the book when Gloria sent a picture of herself smoking a cigarette with the note "Here I am, in Chicago, smoking the torch of freedom!" (Gokhale, 298).

Women's enunciation was a topic of much interest to Tilottama. She was impressed by the news of reformists like Vidyasagar who had the guts to challenge child marriage and enforce widow remarriage. The freedom movement had a deep impact on her as well. She would often reminisce about her uncle, Badri Dutt Uprety's execution and remark: "My uncle was not hanged, but martyred..." (Gokhale, 297) Her rather comic ambivalence to her participation in the rebellion is enumerated when she thought to herself that "I want to give them up too...but first I must buy them...After all, one cannot give up something one has never known!" (Gokhale, 209-210)

She oscillated between the two forms of rebellion in vogue at the time. The narrator observes that Tilottama was "both intrigued and perplexed by the battle between the moderates and the extremists." (Gokhale, 279). She studied about the infamous article "The Country's Misfortune" by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his subsequent arrest because of it. She was also moved by the violence inflicted on the British by the likes of Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki, Auribindo Ghose and Hemchandra Kanungo. She played with the words 'to dare and die' (280) in her head as she contemplated this valiant declaration by Barindra Ghose. The Press Act of 1910, does not deter Tilottama from reading the weekly periodical *Bande Mataram* edited by Shri Aurobindo. As an impact of this a fierce nationalism is seen to awaken in her heart probably catapulted by the circumstances of her uncle's death. She was not content to stay as an uninvolved

bystander. She tried to participate in the events by sending Bal Gangadhar Tilak a postcard to his prison in Mandalay and another to Shri Aurobindo, in Pondicerry appreciating him for his vision.

Tilottama is an enigma, a sum of her fierce self-taught independence, eccentricity genetically inherited from her artistic mother Durga Devi and the deep rooted Brahminical values imbued to her by her maternal uncle and guardian, Devi Dutt Pant. Through her we see the historical events and personalities from the time of the sepoy mutiny till the high noon of the British Empire. She speaks for the silences of history bridges the gaps with her sensitivity. Along with historical events and personalities several contemporary authors have also been evaluated by Tilottama and other characters introducing the postmodern element of intertextuality.

Both Tilottama and her son-in-law Jayesh Jonas had radical views on the rebellious poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Tilottama felt a 'special sympathy' (286) for his controversial life. She became an ardent reader of his *Tilottama Sambhava*, *Ratnavali*, *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, *Bristles of the Neck of the Aged Sparrow*, *Is this What you call Civilization?* and *Captive Ladie*; While her son-in-law had 'ambiguous' views on him. According to him,

Michael Dutt well understood the failures of our Hindu civilization—if you can call it that—but ultimately he succumbed to the lure of that same intimate enemy. (Gokhale, 2016 287)

Tilottama jumped at the opportunity to display her knowledge on the subject of Michael Madhusudan Dutt before her 'erudite' son-in-law. She read from the notes she had taken on the poet and observed that "But he had seen through their tricks before he died." (288). The lesson that Dutt had learned about the English did not seem to impact her son-in-law who had left the room before hearing her views. Perhaps he thought that Tilottama was not in a position to opine on the topic being a self-educated woman. The other poet who managed to tug at the heart of Tilottama was Sarojini Naidu whose *The Golden Threshold* (1905) she had committed to memory.

Apart from Tilottama few other characters were also engaged in reading and discoursing upon authors such as Charles Darwin. The Victorian dilemma engendered by Darwin's theory of evolution not only had its impact in England the trepidation engendered by it also reached India. The ayurvedic doctor Jeewan Chandra was disgusted by Darwin's theory while his nephew (still a Hindu called Jayesh) was excited by the prospect of the same theory. The doctor said:

We are Brahmins and have been since time began. The seven sages who came to this world from the Saptarshi constellation, what your Darwin would call the Great Bear, were our forefathers. We are descended from the stars. And you want to inform me our grandfather was a monkey? (Gokhale, 2016, p.126)

To this his nephew reacted vehemently. He felt disgusted by the backward thoughts of some of the Hindus and pondered, "What a koop-mandook, frog-in-the-well, attitude we Brahmins have." (Gokhale, 131). This discourse got another perspective from the wife of the ayurvedic doctor, Kaumodi, but she was conveniently silenced for women were not supposed to have opinions on worldly matters. According to Kaumodi Darwin's theory was not as odious as it seemed to her husband. She felt that since Lord Hanuman was a monkey and also a God it was honourable enough to have descended from him.

The historical conflict between Christianity and Hinduism has also played a prominent part in this novel. To the ruling British the religious faiths of the native Hindus were at best childish. The advent of the snails by the shore of the Naineetal lake were interpreted by the locals as a sign of the displeasure of the lake goddess Naina Devi, who according to them, had sent her servants (the snails) as a mark of her annoyance. An English woman drowned in the lake and the natives said that the goddess was avenging the imposition of the white man on her sacred waters. To this Mr Lushington, the commissioner of Kumaon responded, "If these superstitious natives want to ascribe it to their lake goddess, who can stop them? They are like children, really," (Gokhale, 9).

The same emotion is voiced later in the novel by the Christian missionary Rosemary Boden when she confronted the worship spot of the village god. Her companion, the gardener, William Ao pointed it out to her saying that it was the spot where the heathens danced. To her it was proof that they needed to be shown the path of the true religion, Christianity: "But it looks like a doll's house!" Rosemary responded. "They are like children, and misguided. We shall show them the way, God's way..." (Gokhale, 233).

The ambivalence towards these two religions is visible in Tilottama, her daughter Deoki who got converted and became Diana and her son-in-law, Jayesh who converted and became Jonas. His own act of transgression irked Jayesh into pondering about his religion. Until then he had thought about his caste as a dog and its tail. But after his transgression with the Christian prostitute Mary, he felt that there was no going back. When his aunt tried to purify him with Ganges water and cow urine, he responded that, he had partaken of the forbidden food, beef, lived with a 'mlechcha' (untouchable) woman, was in love with a white woman and that only Jesus could pardon him. His uncle Jeewan Chandra exonerated him by performing his funeral rites. But towards the end of the novel, he rose above the dictates of the religion and went to sort out his differences with his nephew.

Deoki was forced to convert to Christianity due to her husband's conversion. All through the novel we find ample evidence that she had never really taken this conversion to heart. For example, she never rose above the scruples of foods forbidden by the Hindu religion the same was true for her otherwise progressive mother, Tilottama:

After so many years at the ashram, the dilemma of 'forbidden foods' would not leave her. Deoki's mother, the rebellious Tilottama of yore, had never dared to transgress Brahminical injunctions so far as to actually eat an egg. (Gokhale, 2016, p.237-238)

Deoki's Hindu leanings are once again visible in the episode that she had with Dempster on the top of the hill beside the Ram-Sita Tal. She was wary of the spot and knew that the demon god Airee had secret spots of worship in secluded forests. When Dempster tried to be intimate with her she resisted for fear of the demon god. She was not averse to the union but just scared to death of the god's wrath.

The ambivalence between Christianity and Hinduism is somewhat absolved by the radical Tilottama when in the concluding pages of the novel she realized, "My gods do not reside in these magnificent buildings,' she muttered to herself, with growing resolve, 'but in the hearts of men and women" (Gokhale 294).

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The silences of history have been probed and brought to light by Namita Gokhale in her novel. She has made the readers look deep into the minute mini narratives of individual experiences of mammoth events like the sepoy mutiny; the individual responses to India's freedom struggle especially women's sentiments about the movement and their attempted participation; the impact of radical thinkers like Charles Darwin and Pandita Ramabai on common men and women; the interpretation of the Literary works of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Sarojini Naidu by regular readers; finally the religious dilemma that many Indians faced at the advent of Christianity. The novel is an attempt at unleashing a flurry of untold histories that deserve to be told beyond their forgotten place in the margin.

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