

A Synthetic Analysis of Eco-critical Space(s) and Deliverance of ‘New Wom(e)n’ in Namita Gokhale’s *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*

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Abstract

Liberal feminism encompasses the advocacy for women’s rights and empowerment. The objective of this chapter is to analyze the portrayal of the ‘New Woman’ and feminism in Namita Gokhale’s *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women* (1998) from an eco-critical perspective. This analysis will focus on four remarkable individuals, namely Shivani, Tara Pande, Jiya, and Sakuntala Pande, in order to explore their reflections on these themes. The methodology of the study centers on the examination of the ‘New Woman’ perspective as theorized by Usha Bande and Atma Ram, as well as the ecofeminist theories put forth by Dr. Vandana Shiva and Chris Cuomo, who categorized ecocriticism as a discourse into two foremost substantial groups: cultural and social. These aforementioned women have navigated the trajectory and challenges of their personal journeys, encompassing various life stages such as childhood, adulthood, professional pursuits, and marriage. The complexity of human relationships and environment play a significant role in shaping an individual’s self-development. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that women often encounter various forms of discrimination, feelings of insecurity, and biases that permeate their societal environment.

Keywords— *New Woman, Ecofeminism, Women empowerment, Memoir, Femininity, Transformation, Nature*

I. Introduction

“I grew up in the Kumaon hills, bonded by love and admiration to a band of extraordinary women, aunts and grandmothers and friends of grandmothers, who symbolized for me the ultimate embodiment of dignity, integrity, and sheer indestructible grit. In my upbringing, in the subliminal code I imbibed from these women, femininity never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but its strength – physical, emotional, and moral.” (*ME*, Introduction, p.1-2)

By documenting the biographies and autobiographies with the appreciative accord of four scholastic women in the mnemonic words of their own experiences and in recounting the reminiscences of five spokespersons (Mrinal Pande, Aparna Pande, Ira Pande, Ravi Dhavan, and the author Namita Gokhale) particularly engaged in their lives, Namita Gokhale’s *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women* (1998) explores the social grade of women in the orthodox male-spirited Indian society, their emancipation, education, lifestyle, customs, and struggle to grow up in the challenging mountainous environment and cultural sacrosanct of Kumaon. During that era, women were predominantly obligated to perform ‘humdrum tasks,’ while accounts of

men’s courageous perseverance were documented in historical records. Conversely, women’s struggles, characterized by existential hardships and constraints on their empowerment, have been salted down in folklore and tradition. These narratives persist in the form of vaguely recalled lullabies, the faint touch of a grandmother’s hand, culinary recipes, ancestral jewellerys, and ‘cautionary tales’. As the pages of the book progress, we see that these four ‘extraordinary women,’ namely Shivani, Tara Pande, Jiya, and Sakuntala Pande, by coming out of the wrapping of traditional folktales, have transcended societal and personal hindrances to flourish as ‘new wom(e)n’ who have made cabalistic contributions in numerous fields of society, and through their intellectual prowess, exceptional accomplishments, and creative endeavours, they have carved out themselves as trailblazers, challenging traditional norms and competing with their male counterparts. Namita Gokhale, like acclaimed novelists Anita Desai, Kamala Markanday, and Nayantara Sahgal, by unmollifying her collected reminiscences, incarcerated the snapshots of transition to convey us how these four Kumaoni women transcended the prevailing social norms and expectations and debuted in the shape of ‘New Woman.’ As Usha Bande and Atma Ram explained in their book entitled

Woman in Indian Short Stories: Feminist Perspective (2003), the 'New Woman' refers to an individual who, liberated from the confines of the 'feminine mystique,' possesses a self-awareness that allows her to transcend traditional societal and moral limitations. This newfound freedom enables her to live a life characterized by an enhanced sense of dignity and individuality. It emerges as a result of a transformed economic structure, wherein women reject their previous state of being unnoticed and marginalized. They break free from the metaphorical confinement of *purdah* and embrace the prospects offered through education, suffrage, and employment. Together with her male counterpart, she faces challenges in the realms of professional and economic accomplishments while simultaneously dismantling the perception of a submissive, oppressed, and self-effacing individual (p. 14).

Namita Gokhale, being 'an indefatigable chronicler of life in the Kumaoni hills,' has adeptly delineated the implicit connection between 'women' and 'nature' in her literary works such as *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), *Things To Leave Behind* (2016), and *The Himalayan Arc* (2018), all of which are set in the Himalayan regions. In her cherished work, *Mountain Echoes*, the rapport of nature in the overall manifestation of women and the formation of morality—and how it shaped their mentality by breaking the norms of the male-structured orthodox society—has been meticulously demonstrated by capturing the personal accounts of four great 'new wom(e)n.' As Chris Cuomo claimed, there exists a significant 'moral' bond between 'Women' and 'Nature' (Das). It implies that 'women' and 'nature' who experience oppression exhibit a sense of unity and support towards one another. There exists a prevalent cultural misconception that women possess a stronger affinity for nature in comparison to men. Nevertheless, the assignment of individuals to the domain of nature and caretaking tasks does afford them a comprehension of the interconnections that exist between humanity and the natural world. Women possess a comprehensive comprehension of our inherent reliance on the resources provided by the natural world as well as the formidable influence wielded by nature. The labour assigned to women engenders sensitivities and fosters empathy. Consequently, women possess a moral understanding, not solely due to their biological sex but rather as a consequence of the inherent functions associated with female physiology. Scholars in the field of eco-feminism, such as Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, and Karen Warren, connect their work not just as eco-marxism to the ethical and spiritual perspectives of deep ecology but also to the politically-oriented viewpoints associated with social ecology. Ecofeminism, as Giorel Curran explains, is best subdivided into two categories to allow for substantially different approaches to its two central discourses, which can be effectively applied to the book: (a) The 'cultural ecofeministic approach,' which Sakuntala Pande and Jiya represent, shows how women are innately connected with 'nature' and seeks to make this connection the basis of a new approach to 'nature,' characterized by the caring and emotional capabilities of females; (b) The 'socio-ecofeministic approach,' as represented by Shivani and Tara Pande, rejects patriarchal authority as a form of biological and cultural reductionism. This approach critiques various forms of oppression as being rooted in political, economic, social, and historical constructs. (Curran, P. 116).

II. Review of Literature

The works of Namita Gokhale are increasingly being studied in an academic context for their contributions to contemporary Indian literature by examining gender, culture, and have studied her writing using different critical frameworks such as feminism, ecofeminism, regional literature, and memory studies. *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women* (1998) is primarily an oral history that has begun to gain critical attention, however what distinguishes it from others is that it captures the life stories of women from Kumaon and provides a context for broader social and ecological realities in the Himalayan region. The existing critical study on Gokhale's writing as well as ecofeminist discourses creates a basis for understanding how eco-critical space and empowered female identity has emerged.

Bhatia and Ahuja point out that Gokhale's stories illustrate the psychological and social struggles of women within the framework of contemporary Indian society and portray them as individuals who can resist the constraints of patriarchy. According to their analysis, Gokhale's female characters demonstrate an evolution of identity, marital relations, and the expectations placed on women by society; thus indicating a shift from passive subject to active agent of change in determining the direction of their lives. This model correlates very closely with what is referred to in feminist discourse as a "New Woman." This term is also associated with independence, self-asserting behaviour and intellectual independence.

According to Priya and Palanivel, Gokhale's female characters experience emotional conflict and societal pressures but ultimately assert their individuality and dignity (Priya and Palanivel 921). They argue that Gokhale's works, including novels such as *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *A Himalayan Love Story*, demonstrate a challenge to established stereotypes by exhibiting women who are pursuing education, personal independence and freedom of expression. The analytic approaches adopted by Priya and Palanivel in their analysis of these novels provide critical insights into how the voices of Kumaoni women in Gokhale's *Mountain Echoes* express their own struggles, resilience and paths to self-discovery.

According to Monika's ecocritical analysis of Gokhale's Himalayan narratives, the author emphasizes the correlation between humanity and nature by demonstrating the extent to which both are interrelated in terms of ecological awareness and cultural memory (Monika 2). In Gokhale's narratives, the natural world acts as a living entity that has an impact on both the identity of the characters and the manner in which they interact with their physical environment; in essence, it influences who they become as people. The exploration of the connection between women's oppression and exploitation of nature is further examined using ecofeminist theoretical frameworks - ecofeminist scholars indicate that patriarchal systems have traditionally excluded not only women from the full integration of society but have also excluded nature from society through systems of exploitation and domination (Shiva 13). Many literary studies that explore women's narratives within an ecological context have been influenced by this theoretical framework. The comparative ecofeminist study conducted by Sahil and Naqvi demonstrates how contemporary Indian writers, such as Namita Gokhale, are

able to obtain eco-consciousness and feminist awareness by presenting women as the keepers of knowledge about the environment and as individuals who have retained the cultural memories of their communities (Sahil and Naqvi 15).

According to Nidhi Pande, the Himalayas as a landscape in Gokhale's work can be understood as a "mythscape" that retains traditional indigenous myths, sacred spaces, and shared cultural memory (Pande 4). From this point of view, one can see how the natural environment acts as a place where people's cultural stories and spirituality have been stored. There is also scholarship on feminine life writing/memoir as artful narrative strategies, with both Smith and Watson showing how women writers are able to provide their own voice through auto/biographical narrative, which gives them power over their identity, as well as allows them to build their identities based on both historical and cultural contexts (Smith and Watson 10).

While there have been many contributions to scholarship on Gokhale's work, there is still a significant lack of research on issues of eco-critical spatiality and feminine identity as depicted in Gokhale's *Mountain Echoes*. Most studies that examine Gokhale's novels do not consider both feminist and ecological issues together or at the same time; rather, they tend to treat the two areas of study as completely separate from one another. Only a few scholars have attempted to bring together ecofeminist theory and the concept of the "New Woman" in regard to oral memoir narratives.

Combining feminist theory and ecocritical perspectives allows us to explore how environmental spaces form, shape and influence women's identities as well as demonstrate their struggles and conditions of change. The memoir provides insight into Kumaoni women's personal histories and also demonstrates that the Himalayan region is an exceedingly important location for the memorialization, resilience and empowerment of this demographic. The application of both feminist theory and ecocritical perspectives will provide a richer appreciation for Namita Gokhal's text(s), while showing how these forms work within a larger context of gender, ecology and regional culture in today's Indian literature.

III. Methodology

The study uses qualitative, interpretive approaches to analyze Namita Gokhale's *Mountain Echoes*, through close reading of four biographies (Shivani, Tara Pande, Jiya, and Sakuntala Pande) to explore the development of a 'New Woman' within a specific socio-culturally defined area—the Kumaon region of India. The research is based on ecofeminist theory, utilizing the theories of Vandana Shiva and Chris Cuomo regarding women's experiences and relationship to ecologies, along with Usha Bande and Atma Ram's conceptual framework of the 'New Woman,' to better understand the memoir's themes of empowerment, resistance, and identity formation. The ecological and social conditions will be examined together via ecocritical and feminist theory, with the intention of enhancing our ability to comprehend how the landscape and social conditions have shaped the transformation and realization of identity for women living in Kumaon.

IV. Results & Discussion

Namita Gokhale, being 'an indefatigable chronicler of life in the Kumaoni hills,' has adeptly delineated the implicit connection between 'women' and 'nature' in her literary works such as *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), *Things To Leave Behind* (2016), and *The Himalayan Arc* (2018), all of which are set in the Himalayan regions. In her cherished work, *Mountain Echoes*, the rapport of nature in the overall manifestation of women and the formation of morality—and how it shaped their mentality by breaking the norms of the male-structured orthodoxical society—has been meticulously demonstrated by capturing the personal accounts of four great 'new wom(e)n.' As Chris Cuomo claimed, there exists a significant 'moral' bond between 'Women' and 'Nature' (Das). It implies that 'women' and 'nature' who experience oppression exhibit a sense of unity and support towards one another. There exists a prevalent cultural misconception that women possess a stronger affinity for nature in comparison to men. Nevertheless, the assignment of individuals to the domain of nature and caretaking tasks does afford them a comprehension of the interconnections that exist between humanity and the natural world. Women possess a comprehensive comprehension of our inherent reliance on the resources provided by the natural world as well as the formidable influence wielded by nature. The labour assigned to women engenders sensitivities and fosters empathy. Consequently, women possess a moral understanding, not solely due to their biological sex but rather as a consequence of the inherent functions associated with female physiology. Scholars in the field of eco-feminism, such as Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, and Karen Warren, connect their work not just as eco-marxism to the ethical and spiritual perspectives of deep ecology but also to the politically-oriented viewpoints associated with social ecology. Ecofeminism, as Giorel Curran explains, is best subdivided into two categories to allow for substantially different approaches to its two central discourses, which can be effectively applied to the book: (a) The 'cultural ecofeministic approach,' which Sakuntala Pande and Jiya represent, shows how women are innately connected with 'nature' and seeks to make this connection the basis of a new approach to 'nature,' characterized by the caring and emotional capabilities of females; (b) The 'socio-ecofeministic approach,' as represented by Shivani and Tara Pande, rejects patriarchal authority as a form of biological and cultural reductionism. This approach critiques various forms of oppression as being rooted in political, economic, social, and historical constructs (Curran, p.116).

The very first chapter of *Mountain Echoes* begins with the biography of Gaura Pant, better known

as 'Shivani,' from the perspective of her firstborn daughter, Mrinal Pande, a senior writer and journalist. Overcoming her own personal familial combustibility, Shivani, who escalated facing diverse geographical ambiances and milieus of India from her birth and education to marriage, has made an incomparable contribution to all across the 'Hindi belt,' where she has imparted her nonpareil perspective on institutions like 'marriage' and 'familial relationships.' She considers that marriage for women "comes out as a provisional matter rather than a conclusive act" (ME, p. 25). Shivani, in her memoir autobiography, details a stark picture of the 'appropriate feminine posture' of that time: a 'sad corollary' of the child marriage of her father's sister and her elder sister's unhappy and bitter experience of marriage. On the other hand, she conversely unkennels the personas of the outspoken and fearless 'new wom(e)n,' like the 'white-haired lady,' i.e., her maternal grandmother with her inconceivable ability to lead the family with an independent conduct, and Shivani's second sister's mastery of ancient Chinese, Sanskrit, and Kharosthi not only heralds the advancement as 'new woman' but also apprises the aspect of women's empowerment in the field of education in twentieth century Indian society. The writer Shivani, despite being a Pahari Kumaoni woman, was not very proficient at housework; instead, she spent most of her life studying. Even after marriage, her open-minded husband encouraged her to study and write equally so that she could hone herself and sharpen her skills: "He [Shivani's husband] corrected my extravagances and gave me the right perspective, and gradually I learned to live within my means" (ME, p. 55). Shivani's mother's free will to take her last breath on the banks of the holy Ganga and the mental fortitude that is imparted in *Pahari* women like an obdurate rock of a mountain seem to merge 'nature' and 'woman' into one point inseparably, which is reflected in Shivani's case as well. Right after the demise of her husband, Shivani's venture to establish her sterling reputation within the realm of Hindi literature as an embodiment of the 'New Woman,' alongside her struggle for sustenance along with her four-offspring, reverberated in her conveyed sentiments: "He died twenty-four years ago, and I thought that the world had ended. But we are all strong women from hills, our lives get meaning and our ideas get impetus in adversity" (ME, p. 55).

As her granddaughter Aparna Pande's memoir unfolds, Tara Pande, the second legendary woman depicted in *Mountain Echoes*, is not only a renowned Hindi poet, linguist, and social reformer but also 'a woman of grit and determination who had independent views' (ME, p. 58). Being a Kumaoni Brahmin girl, affectionately known as 'Ija,' Tara Pande, encouraged by her step-mother and liberal husband, bloomed her

ascendancies in three languages: Bengali, English, and Hindi, and as a result of her keen interest in painting, 'Mahila Shilpa Kala Bhawan' became a center of upturn for women. She advocated Gandhiji's national struggle to relinquish the patronizing title 'Kaiser-e-Hind' conferred by the British on the dawn of independence, in which the challenging voices of women's power roared. The flourishing of feminist existence in the East, breaking down the stereotyped notions about women of the West, is palpably coruscated when Tara Pande, the epitome of a 'New Woman,' succeeded her husband as the senior vice-chairman of the Nainital Municipal Board, and when asked by the legendary Jim Corbett if she had come in the place of her husband, she replied with credence, "No, I have come on my own merit" (ME, p. 61). Tara Pande, unlike many afflicted Kumaoni women, kept herself away from the uncompromising situations of seclusion and suffering in the conservative shibboleths of the traditional Kumaoni kitchen, but when she grudgingly underwent into the dire or desperate straits of stereotypical bigoted beliefs during indispensable bodily functions such as menstruation, which resulted in her being admitted to the Bhowali sanatorium at Gethi with the then-lethal disease of 'tuberculosis'. The intense ambience of solitude at the Bhowali sanatorium opens up a productive literary premise in Tara's life, both 'quantitatively' and 'qualitatively', by disentombing "the question of normativity" (Korsgaard, p. 16) in the eremitic equilibrium: "It was a quiet and pleasing spot, surrounded by forests of pine and rhododendron. The forced rest led me to return to my books, to the habits of reading and reflection which my step-mother had inculcated in me so many years ago" (ME, p. 77).

The third female voice in *Mountain Echoes*, Jiya (hardly known by her real name Lakshmi), a woman of values and compassion, is presented formally in the first half by her daughter-in-law Ira Pande, not only a charming 'matriarch' but also a woman with 'progressive and traditional' makeup. Jiya's favourable reception of Ira Pande as daughter by steeping her out of the so-called mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships and by emancipating her from the imposing mundane duties of the orthodox Brahmin kitchen, giving Ira a taste of complete freedom, beckons her penchant towards modernity. As Ira admitted, "Instead of a capitulation of superior bully, this in fact liberated me from the hateful chores of domestic drudgery leaving me free to pursue my own interests" (ME, p. 92). Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's '*Swatantrata*' and 'self-reliance,' the young girls of the time, including Jiya, learned to use the spindle and loom to make their own shares and volunteered to lead the protest. The struggle for independence changed their lives in so many different ways. As a result, "Women were drawn into the

mainstream of life” (ME, p. 111). Jiya, hailing from a Kumaoni Brahmin family, cultivated her independent and progressive femininity by prioritizing activities such as dancing and singing over traditional domestic responsibilities. Subsequently, defying the prevailing social norms of the era, she enrolled in an English missionary school, following her father’s encouragement to pursue Western education. The reassertion of the existence of ‘new woman’ against the constraints imposed by the institution of marriage was made possible by the clarity of her voice: “For me, growing up was imbued with a certain idealism ... I told my family that I did not want to get married, I wanted to devote my life to the nation” (ME, p. 113). Although patriarchal influence prevailed in pre-independence Indian society, characterized by gender discrimination, the sagacity of elder women in family matters was also respected by men. Jiya, by recounting her memoirs, posited one such authoritarian female character named Thul Ija, who took the lead in controlling their family and in decision-making. Jiya’s views on gender relations were quite progressive, particularly her depiction of 20th-century Indian women’s existential shifts: “What I appreciate most is the change in gender relationships. Today’s women were so bright and confident, they are able to compete in a man’s world. I am proud of these women and the way in which they have conducted themselves” (ME, p.127).

As the fourth modernist female icon with a ‘highly developed sense of aesthetics’ in *Mountain Echoes*, Sakuntala Pande is an ‘eye-witness’ of the changing political landscape in India, which has been transcribed in the self-conscious monotone of her granddaughter Namita Gokhale, Chief Justice Ravi S. Dhavan, and her own mnemonic outflow. Sakuntala possesses a distinctive amalgamation of qualities with a ‘charismatic persona,’ which include being influenced by the ambiance of the freedom movement, harbouring a rebellious spirit, adopting an atheistic stance towards the ‘paraphernalia of religion,’ exhibiting a particular fondness for Hindi and Urdu poetry, and demonstrating a profound understanding of contemporary Bengali literature. Shakuntala’s atonement with nature, sitting in a solitary courtyard garden, is described in Ravi Dhavan’s memorabilia, where Ija (Shakuntala for Dhavan) imagines *pukhraj* (a yellow sapphire) in the falling twilight of the Nainital Lake in the light of street lights strung like garlands. Being an idealistic woman, her sense of motherhood and compassion are equal for all her children regardless of gender, so she freely admits her son Mukki’s friend Ravi Dhavan as her own friend: “...my children’s friends also became my friends” (ME, p. 135). After her marriage, Shakuntala developed an inertia barrier as a result of the attire and customs of rural married life. However, the path of introspection

provided by her uncle Pandit Pant eventually removed this barrier and allowed Shakuntala to reclaim her natural independence as a ‘New Woman.’ Thus, certain liberal individuals, predominantly men, have served as a backbone in advancing the cause of gender equality by challenging the prevailing gender discrimination within traditional patriarchal societies. Similarly, women, driven by a strong sense of nationalistic fervour and the principle of ‘civil disobedience,’ have defied various ‘reactionary’ and ‘meaningless’ customs enforced by conservative women within the realm of social existence. Shakuntala Panday, an eyewitness, described it as follows in her own words: “Conventions were breaking down, women moved as freely as men interacting on the same level, and finding their new-found freedom as heady as a breath of fresh air” (ME, p. 152).

V. Conclusion

These four aforementioned ‘extraordinary women’ (Shivani, Tara Pande, Jiya, and Sakuntala Pande), directly and indirectly subangulated with the author’s childhood and adolescent years, are delineated in the light of mountainous life experiences with their erudite lexicon of poetic words, exploding the feminist empowerment along with their accreting, derivation, and peculiarity in the ‘Shakta tradition’, the ‘veneration of the feminine principle,’ strengthening the ‘*Pahari* women’ by achieving excellence in their respective premises. As Rajni Kothari claimed in the forward of Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, “[W]omen are more central than men - at any rate such women as still cherish and nurture the feminine principle (not all of them do). They also seem better equipped for opening up new civic spaces as part of both preserving and rebuilding communities. In sum, femininity and ecology on the one hand and femininity and ethnicity on the other are natural allies, mutually synergizing and often found in practice to be synonymous” (Viii). Women like Jiya and Tara (who identified herself as a ‘mountain bird’) found themselves in the proximity of nature and rose to a ‘new’ womanly identity that highlighted their transitional aspects with *Prakriti* or nature. In the reverberated words of Gokhale, “These women mirror social universe, a unique ethos which no longer exists, that has dissolved into the mainstream currents of modernization and urbanization” (ME, p. 5) but always remain in an insistent ‘genetic memory.’

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