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Explicating Gender and Elucidating Identity: Interrogating Conflicting (re)-presentation of Female Self in Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dream of Passion*

Divya Reddy

Research Scholar

Andhra University

*Abstract: The ramifications of the presentation of gender in different fictional pieces need no separate introduction when it comes to comprehending the repercussions. Various writers, since time immemorial, have always dealt with the issues related to the subordination of the female selves. However, as it is seen, with the advent of the present-day society, there is a glaring turn of events and we find a sheer manifestation of equality both in terms of gender and the associated identity of an individual. Namita Gokhale, one of the towering figures of the contemporary Indian English writers, has carved out a captivating canvas for herself where the female selves both assert and attribute their own rights in the society to a great extent. Her *Paro: Dream of Passion* is a vivid testimony to the fact that the modern Indian women are no longer relegated and this is ably supported by the presentation of the protagonist, *Paro*. This paper is a humble attempt in order to explicate the intricacies of gender and the associated concerns related to identity of the female characters in the novel. By using the critical concept of “performativity” by the notable gender theorist, Judith Butler, this paper interrogates the subtle feminine nuances associated with the two primary female characters in the novel, *Priya* and *Paro*.*

Keywords: equality, female, gender, identity, performativity

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist. [...] Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world.

--- (Rushdie 427)

The modern-day Indian English literature has moved way ahead of the general understanding of the concerns related to the portrayal of the feelings for a nation at large. There are, if we go onto list, broader concerns related to the position of individual selves along with the focus on equality of the genders as well. It can well be said that the days associated with the sheer subordination of the female selves are not rampant and the contemporary literary pieces depict some semblance of equality, if not glaring and vivid. Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dream of Passion*, is one of the most notable fictional pieces which showcases the differences and oppositions between two female characters, namely, Paro and Priya. Gokhale, through her artistic creation, brings in a stark contrast between the two characters with Paro epitomising the free and liberating spirit of the modern society and Priya still is being shown to be stuck amidst the clutches of tradition. Gokhale presents Paro, the protagonist to represent the modern Indian woman with she being shown to have received the Western Convent education. Moreover, as Gokhale presents it, she was a divorced lady who wanted to marry a guy called, Avinendra but was not able to convince his family members.

The concept of identity appears to be of paramount importance in the novel as both Priya and Paro seem to be longing for a stable identity in the society. Gokhale presents Priya to be a docile lady who was seeking for real love but has also compromised with her husband. In other words, she is presented to be someone who was caught between the web of the modern world and the off-shoots of the past. The idea of identity was explained by the notable critic, Erik Erikson to be a two-fold understanding. In his words, the core concern of identity can be defined as a,

A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unselfconscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters. (22-23)

The character of Priya is can be studied to be one of the finest presentations of conflicting gender in the novel. One can find that Gokhale portrays her to be an intelligent lady who prefers freedom. However, it was the marriage to her husband, Suresh which led to drastic harmful conclusions in her life as she made strenuous efforts to be the ideal wife. This, at the same time, led to the relegated position of her identity which weakened her position as an individual. It was seen that she was in love with her boss in spite of being married to Suresh and also followed the dictates of her husband. When Suresh made vehement remark related to dress, Gokhale presents a captivating retort in the Priya's mouth, "I tried to take up smoking but Suresh would have none of it, and even tried to restrain me wearing anything but saris" (Gokhale 3). On the other hand, Paro, although she was free, could not lead a life of respect as divorce is always considered to be a stigma in the Indian society. Although she is "liberated" (Gokhale 41), she is never free in real sense of the term.

The idea of "performativity" by the eminent gender theorist, Judith Butler reigns supreme in the novel. The readers can easily discern that both Paro and Priya tend to perform their gender roles, sometimes according to the family, sometimes according to her liberating spirit. M. Karenga, a renowned decolonising South African scholar, makes a valid remark related to the various gender conflicts in the following lines stating the conflicts to be nothing but

a crisis in views and values which undergird and inspire a practice of un-freedom in the midst of discourse on and struggle for freedom. The vision crisis is defined by a deficient and ineffective grasp of self, society and the world. And the value crisis is defined by incorrect and self-limit categories of commitment and priorities which in turn limit our human possibilities. (7)

The character of Paro echoes the branches of the idea of performativity as she was seen that after her divorce, she was in the company of lovers in order to satisfy her carnal desires. Gokhale presents the son of a high profile minister, a notable politician and also to some degree, the husband of Priya, Suresh to be the "lovers" of Priya. According to Judith Butler, "the performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be...understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility" (4). Gokhale presents Paro to be hankering after so called love and bodily pleasure in the novel by sort of trapping affluent individuals of the society. Also, it could very easily be observed that there was a cold relationship between Priya

and Paro as the latter always cast a cold eye to Priya. It was even evident that Paro was envious of the beauty of Priya as well and all she knew was to lead a life of bodily pleasures in the society. Regarding the beauty of Priya, Paro remarked, “There’s this guy- I’ve forgotten his name but his wife is this dame Paro. They’re stinking rich and she’s really beautiful” (Gokhale 2).

Butler is of the opinion that a particular gender in a society is always known for performing a particular act. There is a constant process of acting according to the situation which makes both male and female subject to the idea of performing one’s gender. As she says, “If what I want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of “my own” desire turns out to be something of a misnomer. I am in my desire, negotiating what has been wanted of me” (11). Gokhale presents the character of Paro to be under the clutches of her own desire to satisfy herself bodily desires although, in the eyes of the society, she was free. Although she is being presented to be a woman with a strong will-power and zeal to succeed in life, she does not attain the satisfaction in life as she is always governed by her own carnal desires.

Gokhale, thus, presents the two characters of Paro and Priya in the novel by depicting them to be quite opposite to one another. However, what inextricably intertwined them together was their longing to be independent and without any limits being put on them in order to lead their life in the society. The following lines by Paro are indicative of the inherent essence of the plight of women in India in general, “I am an Indian woman, I told myself, and for me my husband is my God. So, I got down to telephoning him...” (Gokhale 27).

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