



From Paro to Things to Leave Behind: Evolving Female Voices in Namita Gokhale's Narrative Worlds

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing representation of women's voices and agency in Namita Gokhale's fiction through a comparative study of *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016). Written more than three decades apart, the two novels reflect important shifts in Indian feminist consciousness—from urban, individual-centred assertions of freedom in post-Independence India to historically grounded and socially embedded forms of resistance shaped by caste, colonialism, and collective memory. *Paro* employs satire and a mediated narrative voice to interrogate the contradictions of metropolitan feminism, revealing how sexuality and autonomy are constrained by class privilege and patriarchal norms. In contrast, *Things to Leave Behind*, set in nineteenth-century Kumaon, reimagines women's agency as emerging through education, indigenous knowledge, and everyday acts of survival within colonial society. The paper argues that Gokhale's narrative movement from irony to historical empathy marks a significant evolution in her feminist vision, contributing to broader developments in Indian women's writing in English.

Keywords: Namita Gokhale; female agency; postcolonial feminism; Indian women's writing in English; narrative voice; historical consciousness

1. Introduction

Namita Gokhale's fiction charts an arc in the representation of Indian women's agency that mirrors broader transformations in postcolonial feminist writing from the early 1980s into the twenty-first century. Her debut novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), emerged in a literary landscape still negotiating the possibilities of a distinctly urban Indian feminism shaped by post-Emergency anxieties and the lingering legacies of colonial modernity. Its protagonist, the eponymous Paro, moves through elite metropolitan circles with a sexual assertiveness and wit rarely granted to female characters in earlier Indian English fiction. Yet, as Gokhale's satire makes clear, such apparent freedom remains deeply compromised, illustrating that the performance of autonomy can be as constraining as it is liberating.

Three decades later, *Things to Leave Behind* (2016) relocates women's struggles to nineteenth-century Kumaon, a space shaped by colonial governance, caste hierarchies, and reformist movements. This historical turn allows Gokhale to imagine female agency not merely as individual transgression but as collective, historically embedded resistance. Read together, the two novels reveal an evolution in Gokhale's feminist vision—from ironic critique of elite urban feminism to empathetic recovery of subaltern women's histories. The temporal and spatial distance between the novels also underscores a shift from self-centered urban concerns to narratives engaging with broader historical and cultural forces.

2. Urban Female Agency in Paro

In *Paro*, Gokhale constructs a narrative voice that is complicit in the world it describes. The story is mediated through Priya, a journalist who oscillates between admiration and moral judgement. This narrative positioning produces a layered irony that exposes how women's autonomy is constantly scrutinized. When Priya describes *Paro's* desire for the industrialist Suri, she notes that *Paro* looked at him "the way a cat might look at a bowl of cream, languid but intent" (Gokhale, *Paro* 47). The metaphor conveys sensual agency while simultaneously inviting judgement, revealing the moral ambivalence surrounding female sexuality.

Priya herself acknowledges this contradiction when she admits, "I disapproved of *Paro* even as I envied her" (*Paro* 52). Gokhale thus foregrounds what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan describes as the "double bind" of feminist self-assertion, where women's agency remains mediated through rivalry, gossip, and patriarchal surveillance. The novel demonstrates that even elite women cannot escape societal judgment, and that the assertion of sexual freedom is deeply intertwined with social visibility and competition among peers.

3. Narrative Mediation and Irony

The first-person narrative in *Paro* is not neutral; it filters *Paro's* voice through Priya's perspective. The irony of this mediation highlights the social limitations placed on women's expression. Priya's judgments—mixed with fascination—illustrate the structural silencing and moral policing women face even in elite urban spaces. This narrative strategy underlines the tension between desire and societal expectation, a theme central to urban feminist critique. Gokhale's approach demonstrates that narrative voice itself can become a site of power, controlling whose story is told and how female agency is represented.

4. Satire, Sexuality, and Consumption

The novel's satire is sharpened through its depiction of Delhi and Bombay's elite social milieu, marked by cocktail parties, designer clothing, and transactional relationships. Marriage, rather than intimacy, becomes a marker of status. Reflecting on *Paro's* marriage to the wealthy Suri, Priya observes: "It was not love, nor even desire, but an acquisition—like a house in the right neighbourhood" (*Paro* 83). The analogy exposes the commodification of both marriage and female identity in upper-class society.

Gokhale's critique resonates with Radha Kumar's observation that urban women's freedoms in late twentieth-century India were often articulated through the language of consumption rather than structural change. *Paro's* sexual autonomy, though visible and provocative, remains dependent on wealth and social privilege. The novel thus interrogates the limits of performative emancipation, emphasizing that autonomy within privilege is not equivalent to broader feminist liberation.

5. Limits of Individual Freedom

Despite her apparent confidence, *Paro* herself articulates a deep cynicism about gender relations. After ending an affair, she remarks, "It's not that men change—it's that they stay exactly the same" (*Paro* 102). This insight foreshadows the novel's bleak conclusion, where *Paro's* ambiguous death—falling from a high-rise balcony—becomes a metaphor for the fragility of performative freedom.

Whether accidental or deliberate, *Paro's* death signals the reassertion of patriarchal limits, suggesting that individual rebellion, when detached from collective or structural support, remains vulnerable to erasure. Gokhale implies that empowerment cannot exist solely as spectacle or social performance; it must contend with societal constraints, highlighting the inherent tension between personal desire and structural oppression.

6. Historical Turn in Things to Leave Behind

In contrast to Paro's metropolitan setting, *Things to Leave Behind* opens in the hill town of Nainital in 1856. The historical landscape allows Gokhale to situate women's lives within colonial administration, caste oppression, and reformist ferment. The central figures, Tilottama Upreti and her daughter Deoki, inhabit a world where survival itself becomes an act of resistance.

This shift from satire to historical realism enables Gokhale to move toward a more empathetic feminist narrative grounded in memory, endurance, and community. By anchoring women's struggles in historical and cultural context, Gokhale emphasizes that agency is not solely individual but embedded within familial, social, and environmental networks.

7. Caste and Indigenous Knowledge

Tilottama's agency is rooted in indigenous knowledge systems. Ostracised for her inter-caste marriage, she becomes a respected healer, drawing authority from the natural world. When a British officer dismisses her practices as superstition, she responds defiantly: "This is the wisdom of the forest and the mountains; your quinine comes from the same trees we worship" (*Things to Leave Behind* 112).

Her reflection that "they could shame me, but they could not strip me of what I knew" (*Things* 118) underscores how female resilience operates outside formal institutions. Gokhale thus challenges colonial and patriarchal epistemologies that marginalise women's knowledge. The novel portrays indigenous expertise as a form of resistance, showing that intellectual and cultural authority can emerge even under oppressive structures.

8. Education and Female Awakening

Deoki's pursuit of literacy extends this theme into the realm of education. Aligning with missionaries for pragmatic reasons, she recognizes education as a tool of empowerment rather than submission. She reflects that "each word I learned loosened the knots that bound my world" (*Things* 164). Through clandestine reading of reformist and nationalist texts, Deoki participates in emerging public discourse, despite women's exclusion from formal political spaces.

Gokhale grounds this awakening in material detail—the texture of paper, the smell of ink—emphasizing that intellectual agency develops through lived experience rather than abstract ideals. Education, in this narrative, becomes both a personal liberation and a subtle form of political engagement, connecting knowledge with action in daily life.

9. Recovering Women's Histories

Formally, *Things to Leave Behind* adopts a polyphonic third-person narrative that incorporates colonial officials, priests, and mendicants. This multiplicity of voices situates women's stories within a broader socio-political matrix. As the narrator observes, "What is left unwritten is often what women have lived" (*Things* 201), explicitly linking female experience with historical absence.

This narrative strategy aligns Gokhale's work with the archival turn in Indian women's writing, which seeks to recover marginalised histories from within indigenous frameworks. By giving voice to overlooked characters, Gokhale situates individual lives within collective memory, emphasizing that female agency is inseparable from historical and cultural continuity.

10. Gendered Spaces and Mobility

Mobility functions differently across the two novels. In *Paro*, movement through elite spaces signals status and visibility. In *Things to Leave Behind*, travel is fraught with danger and surveillance. Deoki's journey to attend a women's gathering marks a moment of self-assertion that risks both reputation and safety, underscoring how spatial movement becomes a gendered act of resistance. Furthermore, Gokhale shows that mobility is intimately tied to social networks and community support, highlighting that women's ability to traverse space safely often depends on solidarity and the trust of other women within restrictive societal frameworks.

11. Negotiating Colonial Power

Colonial legal reforms, missionary education, and administrative control reshape women's lives in complex ways. Deoki's strategic alliances demonstrate that resistance often operates through negotiation rather than outright opposition. Gokhale thus presents colonialism as a deeply gendered structure whose effects are uneven and contradictory. The novel emphasizes that subversive acts need not always be confrontational; subtle forms of negotiation, intelligence, and cultural knowledge can become tools of empowerment, allowing women to carve spaces for agency even under systemic oppression.

12. Narrative Form and Feminist Vision

Formally, *Paro*'s episodic structure mirrors the fleeting scandals of elite urban life, while *Things to Leave Behind* unfolds with a panoramic historical sweep. Despite tonal differences, Gokhale's understated humour persists. A missionary's earnest instruction on boiling water is met with the dry response: "We have been boiling water since before you were born" (*Things* 214), underscoring everyday negotiations of cultural authority. Beyond humour, the narrative form reflects the author's evolving feminist vision—moving from a focus on individual experience and satire to a layered, historically informed account that situates women within broader social, political, and environmental contexts.

13. Conclusion

Read together, *Paro* and *Things to Leave Behind* trace a movement from performative liberation to historically grounded resilience. While *Paro* exposes the contradictions of elite urban feminism, the later novel offers a vision of agency rooted in collective endurance and historical memory. Gokhale ultimately reminds the reader that "freedom, for women, is never without consequence" (*Things* 236), foregrounding the costs as well as the courage of resistance across time. In conclusion, these novels collectively illuminate the interplay of class, caste, and historical circumstance in shaping women's agency, demonstrating how autonomy is negotiated both within and against the structures of power that have historically constrained female voices. The paper highlights that Gokhale's feminist project evolves from satire to historical empathy, emphasizing the enduring significance of women's voices across generations.

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