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## Blips, Anchors and Spirals: Memory and Trauma in Selected Short Stories of Namita Gokhale

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the interrelation of trauma and memory in a selection of short stories, drawing on trauma and memory studies to explore how past wounds persist, resurface, and are narratively contained. In Love's Mausoleum, a childhood sexual assault surfaces not as a coherent recollection but in fragmented "blips" triggered by chance encounters, illustrating Cathy Caruth's notion of belatedness and the impossibility of fully knowing trauma in its moment. GIGALIBB refracts grief through a digressive obituary, where the refrain "I remember" and the cryptic acronym serve as mnemonic devices. In Grandhotel III, an abusive yet desired lover invokes an inherited familial memory, where snails and Fibonacci spirals form associative bridges between past and present, suggesting trauma's embodied, non-linear recall. Other works also echo such dynamics: in The Habit of Love, grief takes the shape of a "named" mountain; in Life on Mars, an object—a randomly placed shoe—anchors sudden loss; in The Day Princess Diana Died, public mourning leads to private insecurities. Across all these narratives, memory comes to emerge as an unstable process in which trauma is resisted and re-inscribed, revealing the tension between the compulsion to remember and the impossibility of complete articulation.

## Introduction:

Literature has been studied from various critical perspectives throughout history like feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, among others to explore various ethical and social issues. As contemporary times evolve, so do the subjects that writers choose to explore. These subjects expand beyond traditional social, political, and cultural themes in order to delve into deeper aspects of human psychology and inner experience. In an era where mental health, psychological well-being, and individual identity are increasingly recognized as urgent societal concerns, literature can serve as a powerful medium to reflect and interrogate these issues in order to raise awareness and foster understanding. Namita Gokhale, a distinguished Indian writer, qualifies to exemplify this shift in literary focus. Her writing is characterised by a nuanced style that combines rich narrative techniques with an acute sensitivity toward individual and collective experiences of trauma and memory.

Through fragmented storytelling, flashbacks, and confessional narration, Gokhale foregrounds the complex processes by which her characters confront and reconstruct traumatic pasts, often neglected in mainstream discourse. Although the study of trauma and memory is not a recent academic development, it is undoubtedly more relevant than ever in today's world, where growing communication gaps and the inability to articulate suffering are increasingly prevalent. Examining these themes in Gokhale's work not only highlights the intricate relationship between memory and identity but also underscores literature's role in addressing unresolved social problems and the silent struggles of individuals.

Namita Gokhale, born in 1956, is a prominent Indian author, editor, publisher, and literary festival organizer. She began her literary career with the novel Paro: Dreams of Passion in 1984 and has since contributed extensively to both fiction and nonfiction, including editing various nonfiction anthologies. Apart from writing, Gokhale hosted the Doordarshan program Kitaabnama: Books and Beyond, which explored literature and its many dimensions. She is also a co-founder and co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival, one of the world's largest literary festivals. Her novel Things to Leave Behind was honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2021, recognizing her significant contribution to Indian literature.

The significance of Namita Gokhale's Life on Mars: Collected Stories (2025) lies in the thoughtful integration of 15 short stories centered on the ideas of love, destiny, the essence of being, bonds, mythology, and emotions. The collection is divided into two parts: Love and Other Derangements examines the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, and The Mirror of the Mahabharata literally reinterprets mythological narratives. The context of Gokhale's literary journey is also important. There was a phase of silence after the phenomenal success of Gokhale's debut novel Paro: Dreams of Passion (1984). She rediscovered her voice through short stories in the mid-1990s. Omen I was a significant turning point in this process. In the past 4 decades, Gokhale has published 24 works of fiction and non-fiction, each infused with humor, satire, and reflection, and which break away from conventional storytelling structures. Themes of aging, youth, and the gaps between these, which are relevant to all ages, are frequent preoccupations in Gokhale's thoughtful works.

**Literature Review:**

The study, titled "Women's Well Being in Comparison as Portrayed in Select Novels of Namita Gokhale and Shivani,", conducted by Sharmila Jajodia and Dr. Savita Kishan Pawar, explores the representation of women's physical and psychological health in Indian literature through a psycho-feminist perspective. The authors argue that women consistently encounter systematic marginalisation in their access to general rights like nutrition, healthcare, education, and personal autonomy even when they represent almost fifty percent of the global populace. Their research showcases how these themes can be traced in the works of Namita Gokhale and Shivani while highlighting the enduring nature of gender inequality in the context of contemporary Indian society. The research seems to place itself

within wider socio-political initiatives like India's famous 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign while emphasising to not only mark the challenges faced by women but also help to conceptualise a better and just future. This paper holds significance as it relates individual physical trauma and the societal frameworks of oppression, which frequently influence identity within literary narratives. The psycho-feminist methodology employed by Jajodia and Pawar can aid in enhancing the trauma and memory studies framework by emphasising that structural violence against women can be ingrained in both individual and collective memories in Indian literature.

Priyadharshini and Tribhuwan Kumar's work named "Unveiling the Power of Liberal Feminism in Namita Gokhale's Selected Works: A Journey Towards Gender Inclusivity" explores the possible use of liberal feminist concepts in the context of the selected works of Namita Gokhale. The paper focuses on the portrayal of women's lives and the relations of male dominance. The authors argue that Gokhale's narratives seem to reflect the central tenets of liberal feminism which not only promotes women's freedom and equality but also acknowledges the role of men without excluding them. While referencing Roman Payne's assertion in Hope and Despair that "A woman must prioritize her liberty over a man in order to attain happiness" (Payne, 2008), the study highlights the crucial importance of individuality and identity in the feminist pursuit. By examining the intersections of Gokhale's literary representation and liberal feminist ideology, this research contributes to understanding how contemporary Indian literature deals with feminist thought.

Rajalakshmi V. S. N and Dr. R. Vijaya's study named "Search for Identity, Fulfilment of Aspirations and Breaking Away Ties as depicted by Women in select Novels of Namita Gokhale" examines the depiction of women, their identity, aspirations, and defying societal ties as depicted in select novels of Namita Gokhale—*Paro: Dreams of Passion, Gods, Graves and Grandmother, Shakuntala - The Play of Memory, and A Himalayan Love Story*. Placed in the broader field of gender studies, the research emphasizes upon feminist concerns, particularly on the power struggles and plights faced by women. The authors argue that Gokhale's narratives predominantly revolve around their female protagonists whose stories are told from the perspective of a woman while highlighting their efforts to seek personal identity and freedom from patriarchal constraints. The study explores how these women navigate their oppressive realities by making critical life choices, and how the roles of male characters both obstruct or facilitate their journey towards self-assertion. Despite their desire for identity and freedom, the protagonists frequently encounter outcomes that counter their aspirations which often culminate in some tragic or disillusioning endings. This underscores the complexity of feminist struggles in contemporary Indian literature and suggests that the pursuit of liberation does not always lead to the achievement of happiness or fulfilment.

Another research paper, titled "Time As A Narrative Device In The Novels of Namita Gokhale", written by Dr. Vandana V. Bhagdikar, emphasizes upon Namita Gokhale's innovative use of time as a narrative device, particularly through their first-person narration and flashbacks. These techniques enable Gokhale's characters to reflect on their past while deepening the psychological complexity of the narrative and memory and how they shape identity. In *Paro:*

*Dreams of Passion* (1984), the protagonist Priya juggles between present and past, presenting a confessional tone that seems to blend personal experience with social critique. *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1991) employs retrospective narration as Gudiya recounts her family's fall into destitution and its subsequent consequences of exclusion. *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996) uses dual narrators whose fragmented recollections result in subjective identity formation. *The Book of Shadows* (1999) juxtaposes Rachita's personal trauma with the history of a haunted house by using a journal and a ghost's perspective that connects personal and historical memory. In *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2005), memory and desire intersect as the protagonist recalls a past life that links myth and existential reflection. This study presents a fair idea about how Gokhale's narrative strategy can use flashbacks and turn them into essential tools for exploring consciousness and social realities. This paper has the potential to offer some valuable insight and help in understanding how memory functions as a mechanism of trauma and identity formation. This will support my analysis of memory and trauma in Namita Gokhale's short stories.

**Theoretical Framework:**

This research shall appropriately take for a guiding line Cathy Caruth's conceptual understanding of trauma mainly as an unassimilated and delayed experience. Caruth, a major contributor in the field of trauma studies, defines truth in her book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) as "This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (4). Caruth believes that the truth of trauma cannot be completely found in consciousness and can be found connected to our experiences or language. Caruth believes that trauma can be paradoxical—both hidden and disclosed in the text— and hence she has a reasonable belief that literature can help in understanding the phenomenon of traumatic experiences as it can prove to be a unique space to testify and witness trauma. Texts have the ability to highlight traumatic experiences without having the need to explain it as it can allow its effects, repetitions, silences and fragmented memories to bring to surface such experiences. Literature also becomes an appropriate tool to understand something as complex as trauma through its non-linear narrative and disjointed time frames which helps the reader understand the networks of trauma and memory. Even if non-linear and fragmented, narration itself becomes an attempt of testimony for trauma—characters are compelled to confront what's difficult to articulate.

Caruth also emphasises on what she calls 'belatedness'- a delayed memory which reminds the subject of a traumatic event. The moment of trauma is delayed and a belated memory is created which later gets recalled through some event, experience or even on random occasions. For Caruth, trauma is not just an event but a crisis of memory. Traumatic event has a tendency to not be fully experienced at the time of its happening as it overwhelms the mind's capacity to process that event. Due of this, trauma returns later in intrusive forms—flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations— making memory fragmented and belated. These concepts become crucial for the purpose of this study as some of Namita Gokhale's short stories accommodate everyday characters undergoing major and minor traumatic events. The methodology shall be a discourse analysis of Namita Gokhale's elected short stories.

**Literary Analysis:**

Namita Gokhale's short story collection, *Life on Mars,* delves into some ordinary stories about love, nostalgia, memory and mundane social struggles. Stories like "Love's Mausoleum", "GIGALIBB" and "Grand Hotel III" tackle memory in their own unique narrative techniqueslike flashbacks, nostalgia, intercepting moments of realisations etc. Apart from these stories, Gokhale achieves an appropriate representation of the ordinary experience without any exaggerating or underwhelming storylines like those of "The habit of Love", "Life on Mars" and "The Day Princess Diana Died".

The first subject to consider for this research shall be the story "Love's Mausoleum" where the title represents the Taj Mahal that the narrator is visiting with her friend Amanda. The story does not initiate with any mention of the Taj Mahal though, rather the story seems to be triggered by a beggar being "materialised" in front of a car window with the narrator being inside it (48). Before switching to another subject, although more relatable to the title, the narrator draws a contrast with her past self stating how she no longer reaches for her purse at such occasions. She claims to have changed, "I've changed. I look away" and thinks that feeding these poor fellows is the government's responsibility by using the taxes that the narrator and every other citizen pays (48). She ascribes these thoughts to two other people—her brother and her ex-husband. Before her thought moves on to her ex-husband, the reason for the divorce and her being childless and its positive consequences, the preceding part and initiation of the story seems quite ordinary and hence can be viewed as Gokhale's attempt to put forth a thought process that may safely be considered standard among the general populace.

It becomes understandable how the thought, which has still not reached Taj Mahal, shifts mainly because of the similarity of her thought with that of her brother and her ex-husband. Furthermore as the narrator mentions it already that she has changed, she repeats similar words, "As for me. I've learnt to look away" which connects both the thoughts—one casual and other traumatic—by centering them around some form of 'learning' or, apparently, some 'unlearning' that the narrator had to go through in order to dodge her

feelings (Gokhale, 49). This moment, which Cathy Caruth describes as a unique space for witnessing trauma, indicates that the narrator either attempted to confront her feelings or suppressed them altogether, thereby repressing the associated trauma, which later resurfaced when she had to "look away" from the beggar.

The narration, juxtaposing between the past and the present several times in the story, stays linear only for the time when the events at the Taj Mahal are described. The first significant shift occurs when the narrator is suddenly reminded of her mother-in-law's words about men and how women need to "shut their eyes" (49). The narrative then returns to the present as the narrator observes the ring on her finger—a ring that once belonged to her mother-in-law—before moving back into memories of past emotions. The ring serves as a reminder of how long it has been since she and her husband have been divorced. The juxtaposition continues as the narrator reflects on her husband, not by recounting events in chronological order, but by describing the feelings she experienced during their troubled relationship. Her language reveals a pattern of persistent denial, showing how she overlooked the growing problems at the time in an effort to maintain the marriage, without recognizing the trauma unfolding. In the present, the narrator helplessly contemplates that being childless might be preferable to settling alone, a thought that inevitably triggers memories of her husband once again.

The narration moves forward and stays in the present where the narrator visits the Love Mausoleum/Taj Mahal with her friend Amanda. Here, a glimpse of the narrator's longing for love can be seen—"I wish I could be loved like that"—when she ponders over Shah Jahan's love for his wife (51). It can be noted throughout the story that Gokhale has tried to maintain a stance that the narrator is not devoid of feelings because of her traumatic events: she feels it on occasions which reminds her of her sad memories thereby inflicting traumatic flashbacks. The narrator even likens herself to her abandoning ex-husband once when she emphasises that herhusband worked best in "a controlled environment" and she thinks, "I think I do, too" (51). Such flashbacks or reminders are not fully articulated by the narrator but the narration allows for occasional connections through language that helps the reader understand where her feelings and memory stem from.

Trauma isn't always realised fully at any given moment. Sometimes it needs repeated attempts at articulation or processing for it to materialise completely in the future. Throughout the story the narrator can be seen referring to her husband a few times but after an incident that follows Amanda's sudden encounter with her friend Tony and her decision to go with him to Jaipur, leaving Malika, the narrator, to return to Delhi alone, Ramesh is never mentioned again. This can be seen as a mechanism for the narrator to relive the absence of her husband whereas Amanda gets some male company. Soon the mentions shift to other people like her grandmother and her classical music teacher Ruma Devi. Ruma Devi is introduced to the story through another chance happening when the narrator is returning from

Agra alone. The chauffeur hums a song which reminds the narrator of her love for singing which introduced her to Ruma Devi upon her parents' insistence. Ruma Devi serves to be just another link that will soon take the narrator to the unattended and probably the biggest trauma of her life.

The narrator, in the last quarter of the story, tackles her biggest trauma which involves a past memory of Ruma Davis's Tabalchi. While talking about the success story of Ruma Devi, the narrator is reminded of her childhood while observing the landscape "when, suddenly, an unpleasant memory emerged with a little blip from the locked black trunk that constituted" her past. This sudden emergence of memory illustrates Caruth's concept that trauma remains inaccessible at the time of the event and returns later in fragmented, involuntary flashes, disrupting the linear flow of narrative and revealing the unresolved nature of past suffering. The narrator also explains how she consigns the "unpleasant parts" of her life into a "large trunk that sits improbably in the pastel drawing room" of her head and that this trunk has an "iron padlock", the key to which she has "thrown away". The narrator sees this incident as the first time in her life that "something had tried to escape from the trunk on its own" (59). The story proceeds with the descriptions of events that lead up to that traumatic incident with Ruma Devi's Tabalchi. Just because the narrator had once tried to innocently reciprocate the expressions of the Tabalchi just like Ruma Devi did, the Tabalchi takes this as a sign and leaps onto the narrator. The narrator froze in fright and a "seamless terror" enveloped her so completely that she broke out into a sweat at the very memory ever since.

Cathy Caruth, in her seminal book *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* states:

> Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. (1996, 4)

Caruth's idea, that trauma is not known in the first instance, reflects how the narrator had also not processed that traumatic event ever. The times she was reminded of it, she would try to forget it as soon as possible until she finally made a brave attempt to confront it. She tries to recall through her blurry memory and feelings about how she was afraid of her father, of being found out, of being pregnant and of the judgement she might face from her mother. The narrator comes to sudden realisation:

> Only today, umpteen years later, did it dawn on me with a flash—It was a flash, I swear, a flash of clean white light—that I had done nothing wrong. I was not guilty, I was not to blame, I had smiled innocently at Ruma Devi's Tabalchi and he had attacked me, middle-aged beast that he was. (Gokhale 60, 61)

The narrator finally confronts her trauma and realises what had happened and how her innocent self had nothing to do with it. At this moment she seems to link everything together and forgives them—the Tabalchi, her mother-in-law and her husband Ramesh "for all the remembered and forgotten atrocities" (61) Most importantly, she forgives herself. The fragmented recollection of abuse and betrayal by the tabalchi, her mother-in-law, and her husband emerges belatedly, revealing how the trauma was never fully comprehended in real time. Her act of forgiveness marks a significant moment of recognition and tentative integration, although Caruth would caution that such reconciliation does not erase the trauma's unresolved and disruptive presence. Instead, it signals an important step in narrativizing the trauma, giving voice to the silent wounds that haunt her memory. Though it can be seen that for the narrator, even if for the time being, "everything fell into place" (61). She suddenly realises what all went wrong in her life and why. She finds some answers to questions, "that missing piece of the jigsaw . . . It is as though the clouds have parted and let the sunlight in". The narrator reaches back to the point that triggered, but helped tackle the traumatic memory in the first place: "a chauffeur's faltering song had released me from that imaginary prison, that forgotten past" (61). Contrasting with Caruth's caution about an unresolved trauma, the narrator seems to have finally realised the trauma fully and replaced it.

Another story that deeply engages with the confrontation of past memories is "GIGALIBB". The narrator begins by describing the act of storytelling as navigating "the slushy terrain between memory and fiction," immediately suggesting that memory is unstable, fragmented, and mediated through narrative. The impetus to write the story emerges from the narrator's encounter with Kaka Kohli's obituary, which abbreviates his personal motto from GIGALIBB—"God is Great and Love is Bloody Blind"—to GIGALIB. This small but significant alteration in the public record underscores the slippage and distortion inherent in memory and its representation.

Kaka Kohli's presence in the narrator's recollection functions as a catalyst for the resurfacing of multiple intertwined traumas. His role in managing the narrator's heartbreak, his infatuation with the narrator's aunt, and the secret he requests to be kept contribute to a sense of unresolved affect and latent guilt. The narrator's deep attachment to Kaka Kohli, symbolized by a silver pendant inscribed with the acronym, reflects an embodied memory that resists full articulation.

The narrative structure deliberately disrupts chronology, with repeated use of the word "once," suggesting an unstable recollection where events float free of temporal order. This aligns closely with Cathy Caruth's understanding that certain experiences resist being fully known and instead return "belatedly" in fragmented, haunting recollections (Unclaimed, 4). The drowning of Aunt Bindu—first surviving, then succumbing three

months later—operates as a spectral repetition, a traumatic event that refuses closure and insists on being remembered.

Moreover, there is a subtle connection to Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, though the narrator is a direct witness to these events. The way the obituary mediates Kaka Kohli's legacy suggests a transmission of memory that is partly personal and partly collective. The narrator admits, "it was long ago, and probably of no consequence to anyone any more. But I had to record and remember this, to relive those days, and learn again from Kaka Kohli's obituary announcement of that enduring message of his life" (47). Here, the act of writing becomes not just a personal catharsis but a postmemory project—an attempt to shape the inherited, mediated legacy of trauma into something tangible and communicable.

Thus, GIGALIBB exemplifies the complexity of trauma and memory, illustrating how traumatic events resist linear narration and require repeated acts of bearing witness. The story emphasizes that memory does not offer easy redemption but remains a site of tension between forgetting and the compulsion to remember.

In "Grandhotel III", Namita Gokhale explores how traumatic memories manifest as fragmented, repetitive images that resist linear narration. The protagonist's journey through memory reflects Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is not fully accessible at the time it occurs but returns later in haunting, incomplete ways. The grandmother's condition illustrates this vividly: she is caught between her present bodily decline and vivid, disjointed recollections of the past, blending personal, familial, and historical moments in ways that destabilize chronological order. Her memories of political events and childhood experiences resurface unpredictably, highlighting trauma's non-linear character.

The narrator's own experiences of trauma are deeply embodied. She recalls moments of physical and emotional intimacy with her lover, which leave lasting marks on her body and psyche. These memories intertwine with reflections on her grandmother's body, revealing a striking sense of inherited experience. By recognizing physical similarities and shared vulnerabilities, the narrator conveys a postgenerational dimension of trauma, resonating with Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory. Trauma, in this sense, is not only personal but inherited and relived through the body, linking past and present generations.

Nature imagery, particularly the crawling snails along the lakeshore, functions as a metaphor for memory's slow, fragmented, and delicate reconstruction. The narrator contemplates the snails' methodical progress and telepathic potential as a way of bridging past and present, echoing Caruth's idea that telling trauma is an attempt to give shape to experiences that resist being fully known. The fragmented, cyclical recollection of events—from childhood summers in Nainital to the grandmother's final days—reflects an ongoing

negotiation with the past, emphasizing that memory and trauma are inseparable from bodily experience and relational ties.

Ultimately, Grandhotel III shows that trauma persists in images, sensations, and embodied connections rather than coherent narratives. The protagonist's reflections on her own body in relation to her grandmother's underscore how trauma can span generations, with the act of remembering becoming a crucial, if incomplete, means of witnessing and surviving the past. The story highlights that the process of confronting trauma is ongoing, layered, and embodied, rather than resolved through chronological or narrative closure.

**Conclusion**:

Namita Gokhale's Life on Mars and stories such as Grandhotel III and GIGALIBB illuminate the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and identity, demonstrating how literature can act as a medium for exploring psychological and intergenerational experiences. Through techniques such as fragmented storytelling, flashbacks, and confessional narration, Gokhale portrays trauma not as a linear event but as a recurring, often involuntary presence in her characters' lives. The embodied nature of trauma—seen in the narrator's reflections on her own body in relation to her grandmother's or through physical recollections of past violence—echoes Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as inaccessible at the moment of occurrence but persisting in haunting forms. Simultaneously, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory becomes relevant in the ways Gokhale depicts inherited or shared experiences of suffering, emphasizing that trauma can span generations and shape relational and bodily memory. Symbolic imagery, whether through snails, natural patterns, or domestic and mythological references, further reflects the characters' attempts to reconstruct fragmented pasts and negotiate meaning from lived experiences.

The justification for focusing on Gokhale's stories lies in their contemporary relevance. Unlike classical or historical narratives, these works address modern concerns around identity, mental health, and social dislocation, making them particularly suited for examining how memory and trauma are experienced and articulated today. By analyzing these narratives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary Indian literature negotiates the psychological dimensions of trauma and memory, offering insights into the evolving discourse on individual and collective suffering. Furthermore, such study provides a foundation for future research exploring the intersections of literature, psychology, and cultural memory, especially in contexts where intergenerational trauma and embodied recollections remain underexamined.

Ultimately, Gokhale's work exemplifies how stories of trauma and memory can foster reflection, empathy, and nuanced understanding, bridging gaps between personal, familial, and collective histories while advancing scholarship on contemporary literary representations of human experience.

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