beatings / trusting the same. / I grew up, / And my mother grew old. / We both still had the same God.…) [6]

The poem reveals how patriarchy functions not solely as an external structure imposed upon marginalised communities but as an internalised and deeply embedded force within them. The poem articulates well the vicious atrocities on the woman, who is the sole provider and central to domesticity, and is consistently subjected to violence and economic disempowerment by the male members. The speaker's early belief in faith as a protective force against domestic abuse gradually gives way to the realisation that religious belief often serves as a mechanism to normalise suffering and silence resistance. The mother's hard-earned money is claimed by her husband and son, highlighting the economic exploitation within the household. The poem portrays the father, whose authority is unquestioned despite his abusive behaviour, as the normalised figure of male dominance. Through this portrayal of the family life of an Adivasi woman, the poet highlights how women are denied agency and remain entrapped in systems of control within their communities. The internal marginalisation is further reinforced by religious fatalism, another influence of outside contact, where suffering is appropriated as a test of the divine will. The poem powerfully illustrates the normalising and internalising of violence through faith. In the context of marginalisation, faith becomes a coping mechanism that unintentionally justifies and sustains the very powerful structures of oppression.

The poem also highlights the escalating issue of alcoholism and the resulting mental, physical, and emotional violence inflicted upon women by the men within their households. Traditionally, the moderate consumption of alcohol made from rice and mahua has been an integral aspect of Adivasi cultural practices. However, this cultural element has been exploited by *dikus* who, after ingratiating themselves within Adivasi communities as well-wishers, push them towards alcohol intoxication. Many such instances of wrongfully seizing the Adivasi lands under the influence of alcohol have been historically reported.

Furthermore, the displacement of Adivasi people due to state-led land acquisition for development projects has led to the extermination of traditional livelihoods. As a result, many of the displaced turn to alcohol, leaving women to carry the burden of dual responsibilities of contributing to the household

economy and managing domestic chores while also becoming increasingly vulnerable to the alcohol abuse inflicted by addicted men of the house.

The following lines of the poem capture this aspect within the household where male figures, fathers and brothers, reproduce patriarchal hierarchies that Adivasi communities were historically known to resist. Thus, Adivasi women face a dual burden of oppression: externally through the forces of the state and the capitalist market and internally through the gradual loss of their autonomy and voice within their own cultural and familial spaces.

माँ की मेहनत का हिस्सा
अब भी भाई छीन ले जाता,
और शाम होते ही पिता
पीकर उस पर चिल्लाते।
वे कभी नहीं बदले,
ना माँ के दिन कभी सुधरे। (*Ishwar* 26).

(*Brother still / Took the fruits of Maa's labour, / And by evening, / My drunken father / Still shouted at her. / They never changed. / And neither / Did my mother's fate*.) [7]

Violence surrounding land and natural resources in Adivasi regions manifests in multiple, deeply troubling forms, many of which are gendered and specifically target women. One of the most alarming of these instances of inflicted violence on women is the continued practice of witch-hunting in some of these regions. Despite legal prohibitions, these practices persist in various forms. It involves inhuman ways of ostracising women by character assassination. Such convergence of patriarchy and superstition is observed in these areas for controlling women, particularly those who are landowners and without men in their lives. This stigmatisation isolates women from the community, stripping them of dignity and, in many cases, from access to basic resources and protection. Women accused of witchcraft are subjected to brutal killings or mob lynchings.

Nirmala Putul's poem "Dhepcha Ke Babu" illuminates a gory incident narrated by a woman whose husband migrated to Kashmir for labour. The poem captures the plight of economic hardship and patriarchal prejudices that

these women face. The poem depicts how women without male protection are more prone to blame and victimisation. The accusation of witchcraft is the most dehumanising and terrifying tool of control and punishment in some communities that can strip a woman of her dignity, safety, and even life. The community's display of such brutalities reveals how patriarchal violence intersects within the very structures that are themselves marginalised. Through its unsettling imagery, the poem serves as a powerful indictment of the gendered violence that remains pervasive and normalised within marginalised communities.

ढेपचा के बाबू
तुम तो सब कुछ छोड़–छाड़
चले गए कमाने कश्मीर
भाग गया ढेपचा भी
अपने साथियों के साथ असम
गाँव का हाल तो जानते ही हो
जिसका मरद साथ नहीं होता
उसे कैसे–कैसे सताते हैं
गोतिया–भाई, आस–पड़ोस के लोग...
और एक दिन तो गजब ही हो गया
लखना के बेटे को साँप ने काटा
तो सब के सब आ धमके हम पर
कहने लगे, "डायन है ये!
कुछ कर दिया है उसके बच्चे को!"
वो तो अच्छा हुआ सरबतिया ने साँप देख लिया
नहीं तो पकलू बुढ़िया की तरह
मुझे भी घसीट कर ले जाते लोग कुंली में
और भरी पंचायत में सिर मुंडवा
नचा देते नंगा
कर देते मुँह पर पेशाब
ठूँस देते मैला!... (*Nagade* 47).

(*Dhepcha's babu, / You left everything behind / And went off to earn in*

Kashmir. / Even Dhepcha ran away / To Assam with his friends. / You know well / The affairs of the village / How a woman without a man / Is tormented / By relatives, neighbours, everyone… / And then one day, / Things went completely awry. / Lakhna's son was bitten by a snake, / And suddenly they all stormed on me / Saying, "she's a witch! / She's done something to the boy!" / Thank God Sarbatia saw the snake herself. / Otherwise, like old Paklu, / They would have dragged me / To the village square, / Would have shaved my head / In front of the whole panchayat, / And forced me to dance naked, / Urinated on my face, / And stuffed faeces in my mouth.) [8]

The lines reflect how Adivasi women stand at the lowest rung in multiple hierarchies. They suffer not only from systemic state and economic violence but also from the cruelty of their immediate social surroundings. Elina Horo and Annisa Burgos, both Adivasi women activists, persuasively argue that such acts represent some of the most tragic and horrifying forms of discrimination faced by Adivasi women today. These practices are not only the reflection of legal failure and institutional protection but also the loss of traditional communal ethics under pressure from economic marginalisation, cultural distortion, and the encroachment of dominant societal norms that often fail to value or protect women's lives.

Conclusion

Any meaningful discourse on gender can only happen by examining the voices whose struggles remain invisible. The lived experiences of women of Adivasi or Dalit communities and others involve the layered and intersectional nature of oppression. If feminist praxis fails to incorporate these intersecting realities, it risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to dismantle. Intersectional feminism does not reject feminism; instead, it refines and expands it by foregrounding how overlapping systems of caste, class, gender, and state violence compound inequality. Therefore, the day-to-day struggle of Adivasi women must be seen through a nuanced socio-political and economic standpoint. Their specific issues, such as land dispossession, economic marginalisation, trafficking, and systemic neglect, must be addressed through structural changes.This includes understanding our own privileges and

advocating for gender-responsive public policies to address these gaps.

As asserted by Crenshaw, "if we cannot see the problem, we cannot fix it." Internal voices of resistance, such as those of poets Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul, play a vital role in highlighting and addressing the problem through creative assertions. Their works document pain, proclaim strong cultural agency, and reimagine justice. These poetic expressions offer counter-narratives that challenge both patriarchal oppression and external colonising forces. Through a close reading of these poems, the essay ultimately argues that the struggle for gender equality must be directed toward concrete policy outcomes rather than confined to questions of identity alone. It must include those intersecting multiple forms of marginalisation created by layers of power structures. We can move toward justice and empowerment of the most marginalised by exploring these voices and addressing the structural roots of inequality.

Notes

1. All English translations of original Hindi poems quoted in this essay are by the author for academic analysis and accessibility. These excerpts are from Nirmala Putul's poetry collection *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (Vani Parakshan, 2004, 17) and Jacinta Kerketta's *Aur Bazaar* (Rajkamal Prakashan, 2022, 116-17).
2. These quotes are from Nirmala Putul's *Beghar Sapne* (Adhar, 2014).
3. These quotes are from Nirmala Putul's *Beghar Sapne* (Adhar, 2014).
4. This poem appears in Nirmala Putul's collection of poems *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (12).
5. These excerpts are from Jacinta Kerketta's poetry collection *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (132).
6. These lines are also from Jacinta Kerketta's *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (26).
7. The lines are also from Kerketta's *Ishwar Aur Bazaar* (27).
8. This narrative poem appears in Nirmala Putul's *Nagade Ki Tarah Bajte Shabd* (47).

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Oscillation between Past and Present: Physical and Emotional Mobility in Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*

Himanshu Kumar

Abstract

This essay explores how Namita Gokhale's novel, *The Book of Shadows* (1999), shows that Rachita Tiwari's journey after an acid attack is not just about her personal struggle with trauma and recovery, but also about how she navigates power, gender, and her surroundings. By applying Tim Cresswell's mobility theory, which distinguishes between movement and mobility, the article analyses three connected aspects: physical mobility, temporal mobility, and spectral mobility. It argues that having a privileged background allows Rachita to escape to her family's ancestral house in the hills, but the violence and shame she faces because of her gender greatly limit her ability to move around and be seen, highlighting the unequal access to mobility that Doreen Massey discusses. Trauma theory (particularly Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra) helps us understand why Rachita has trouble sleeping, flashbacks, and a fragmented narrative, seeing these as symptoms of the 'belatedness' of trauma rather than just memories. The haunted house in Kumaon becomes a place where different mobilities, from colonial to postcolonial times, intersect, showing how Rachita's healing is tied to older stories of missionary work, forced labour, and local superstitions. By the end of the novel, Rachita's claim to a 'right to exist' marks a shift from merely surviving to what Cresswell calls 'meaningful [im]mobility': a feminist way of taking control of movement, stillness, and visibility that changes both her sense of self and the spaces she inhabits.

Keywords: Gender; Mobility; Recovery; Space; Trauma

Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* (1999) is a novel about Rachita Tiwari, an English lecturer at Jesus and Mary College (Delhi), who has her whole world turned upside down when her fiancé (Anand) commits suicide

and his sister throws acid on her face. The novel describes Rachita's odyssey in coping with her new life. She escapes to her ancestral home in the Kumaon hills, and her past is overlaid with her present and her future desires in a swirling melee of emotion. While the novel is about Rachita's quest to deal with her shame and her injuries—physical and psychological—it is also about the Indian woman's search for an existence where she can have her rightful place in society in the late twentieth-century, an existence where her past and her history are taken cognizance of.

Recent work in mobility studies (Tim Cresswell and Doreen Massey) argues that movement is never simply physical displacement but an intricate social phenomenon. This essay uses 'friction' as a theoretical model to conduct a literary reading of Gokhale's novel and analyse the thematised and embodied experience of mobility through Rachita's life. It examines the varied forms of bodily and psychic mobility that Rachita experiences across the three registers of space, time, and the spectral, thereby illustrating the general principle that friction can be a powerful device to organise and enrich what is otherwise a one-way or asymmetric relation. The essay argues that Rachita's experience of modernity in India was one of considerable amounts of friction: trauma, gendered norms, and social stigma.

This essay draws on trauma theory (Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra) to argue that Rachita's multiple temporalities repeat the trauma structure of repetition in the form of the recurrence of the traumatic event and the belated realisation of its effects. At the same time, drawing on feminist theories of gendered mobility, it examines how Rachita's physical disfigurement, withdrawal from the public sphere, and partial return to it point to unequal citizenship in terms of the right to mobility, visibility, and civic recognition. The haunted house in Kumaon is a site where several narratives of mobility intersect: the colonial missionary's travels, the forced labour to which the local villagers are reduced to protect themselves from malevolent spirits, and Rachita's search for her own identity as a modern woman who seeks to make good on her loss of self, following trauma.

The Book of Shadows uses Rachita's journey to tell the story of her recovery from trauma; in the process, it brings to light the politics of mobility and gender. Trauma and the rearrangement of space in the novel force Rachita

to renegotiate her identity and sense of belonging. By the end of the novel Rachita comes to realise that "defined in time and space and dimension, I had the right to exist!" (Gokhale 213). This journey from immobility and effacement to mobility and existence is thus an example of "meaningful [im]mobility" that reveals and recreates social inequality (Cresswell, *On the Move* 239).

To engage with the novel through the perspective of mobility studies, it is essential to understand the difference between movement and mobility. According to Tim Cresswell, "Movement is rarely just movement; it carries with it the burden of meaning" (*On the Move* 6). In contrast, mobility is "a fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices" and exists as a delicate connection between actual movement and symbolic representations (Cresswell, "Towards a Politics" 18). Cresswell outlines six essential components of mobility: "motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction" (17). These elements create "constellations of mobility" that organise every human practice (29).

Movements develop meanings through specific "social, cultural and political contexts" (Adey 63). Drawing on Doreen Massey's concept of extension, Cresswell states that time–space compression "needs differentiating socially" because it affects distance and time perception due to social and technological advancements (Massey, "Power-geometry" 62). Mobility is "accessed and experienced differently by different social groups" (Adey 117). The narratives about trauma, healing, and belonging in *The Book of Shadows* function as social negotiations between mobile and immobile states that develop through history, power, and memory. The protagonist's movement between static and dynamic areas demonstrates the 'meaningful [im]mobility' defined by Cresswell and Massey.

The trope of physical, temporal, and spectral mobility/immobility is central to *The Book of Shadows* and informs three of its strands. The first is the physical mobility of the protagonist, Rachita: her journey from Delhi to Kumaon and then back again, her comings and goings from her home and the hospital, and her aspiration and desire to step out into the world. Here, we focus on the forces that propel her in her physical travels (healing, escape, concealment, and forgetting), as well as the obstacles she encounters (social shame, the fear of being visible and reduced to nothingness), and her sense of isolation or

belonging to a social world. The second is the temporal mobility of the trauma of the acid attack, as illustrated by Cathy Caruth's assertion that because a traumatic event occurs in a state of clinical unconsciousness or delirium, it does not enter into the before-and-after narrative structure of time and so remains "belated" in relation to the personal narrative of the self (4). Rachita's ongoing attempt to return to the time of the attack as well as her being haunted by images and voices that invade her present illustrate this temporality of trauma and also the otherworldliness of her traumatic experiences that exist alongside her everyday life. The third is spectral mobility, by which Rachita escapes from her bodily and temporal trauma and accesses alternative worlds. These include her world of fantasy, her memories of childhood, and her relation to the colonial past embedded in the old bungalow in which she lives with her adoptive family and discovers through the missionary journal of William Cockrell.

Finally, because Rachita's mobility is unmistakably gendered, this framework is aligned with feminist accounts of women's constrained movements. Viola Klein opines that women have been "restricted by a century-old history of submissions, which had bred in them a sense of inferiority" (34). In this essay, we observe how the acid attack on Rachita, the social boycott she suffers at the hands of her neighbours, and the unrelenting pressure to look beautiful that she has to undergo in order to not be seen as rebellious by her society encapsulates the idea of gendered mobility and restriction in the most brutal possible terms. The struggle for Rachita to assert her right to exist may be seen as a feminist interpretation of the concept of mobility in a world where she is seen and recognised.

At the outset of the novel, Rachita's life in Delhi is characterised by her inner world being disconnected from her outward actions. As an English lecturer, she performs competence and authority in the classroom, yet confesses that she is "an earnest overgrown student masquerading as an academic" (Gokhale 3-4). Her infidelity in relation to her fiancé, Anand, causes his suicide. After Anand's death, his sister attacks Rachita with acid. According to Terry Eagleton, there exists an impression of distortion as "we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify" (143). The acid attack disrupts Rachita's fictional self and her face.

In terms of mobility, acid attack is a violent and non-consensual act of imposition of immobility on Rachita's body. She is restricted to hospital beds, her home, and on specially created routes to take her from one place to the other without being harassed by onlookers. On the one hand, Rachita's subsequent mobility is determined by the desire to extricate herself from the very social world that has marginalised her, and on the other, to find a place where she can recuperate. Divorced from the workplace, her colleagues, her students, and her family, Rachita resists the hurried and modern manner of living her life in the cosmopolitan city. Her withdrawal from the world of work and social relations and from the domain of kinship is not merely a static rebellion against the relentless daily pace of movement. Rather, it is a calculated act of immobility that resists the various forms of compulsion to move that have become necessary for the modern and cosmopolitan female subject in the city.

Movement can be defined at two different levels: physical and existential. It was the physical movement that prompted Rachita to shift to her ancestral home in the Kumaon hills. It is a centrifugal movement from the centre to the periphery, from the college to a more ancient and secluded environment of the hills, to escape the public world and to "heal, to hide, to forget" (Gokhale 6). She wishes to reach the hills to recover herself and to have an opportunity of "solitude and soliloquy to come to terms with what had happened" (7). Cresswell contends that "movement is rarely just movement" (*On the Move* 6). Similarly, Rachita's movement to Kumaon had a host of implications for her relations with space, time, and self.

The ancestral house becomes a prime location in the story of Rachita and her lived experiences of memory, mobility, and selfhood. Rachita affirms "we have closed ranks together, me and the house" almost at the very beginning of the story (Gokhale 1), and also later on when she expresses that "the house soothes my hatred, hushes my sorrow" (7). Thus, Rachita and the house form a coalition with each other, thus amalgamating the social and historical relations present with the house and its surroundings.

In Cresswell's terms, Rachita's experience of time in the house is as an entanglement of place, performance, and discourse. Although confined to the house, the practices she adopts, such as reading, smoking, listening to stories,