

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

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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,

and roaming around in rooms, ensure an active internal space of mobility. While the cold taps of the college washroom provided her with no respite during her assault, the house felt like something that was embracing her. It acts as a womb for Rachita and serves as both a “repository of my youth, and the custodian of my dreams” (Gokhale 7).

This spatial reorganisation exemplifies Cresswell's claim that “mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place” (*On the Move* 3). When Rachita escapes to the hills, it is not merely a physical change of location. As Iain Chambers points out, it is “shifting constellations of meaning, identities, openings and possibilities” (193). Through all these different constellations of mobility, the colonial past of the house and all the people involved in it are reinterpreted when Rachita enters it as part of her own personal history.

Gender complicates Rachita's relationship with a place as well as her movement. The acid attack strips away her identity as Rachita, leaving her feeling alienated from “my face, the familiar index of my being, has dissolved into absurdity and abstraction” (Gokhale 7). According to Viola Klein, women are “restricted by a century-old history of submissions, which had bred in them a sense of inferiority” (34). Rachita's withdrawal from the world is thus both a defensive strategy and an enforced immobility against the violence she experiences as a woman—violence of the intimate, gender violence and social violence.

The house becomes her personal prison and increases her self-awareness. This stagnation of her life ultimately leads to self-realisation, in which she recognises that she is more than just her appearance or her roles as fiancée, lecturer, and sister. Throughout the day, she reads, reflects, and observes the world around her, describing her state of mind with the banal description of tedium and a feeling of inertia. At the same time, she recognises the ability to cope with her current state of mind through an inner struggle with herself: “if one loses—one's sense of self, there is no remedy but to proceed on a simulated model” (Gokhale 216). Therefore, in the novel, the house becomes a unique space or what Cresswell has termed as a crucible of “meaningful [im]mobility”—a place which is being interrupted; and this leads her to realise the importance of her movement in that place and the purpose behind that movement (*On the Move* 239).

Rachita moves physically in the space of Kumaon but her narrative expands in time. Her experience of trauma disrupts the timeline of her narrative, preventing her from separating her present from her past. The events of her past are in a continuous state of flux with her present. Trauma theorists suggest that it is not the temporal position of an event that makes it traumatic, but rather the structure of the subject's present experience that the event occupies. Caruth describes trauma as an "unclaimed experience" that returns through the media of nightmares, flashbacks and other symptoms long after the event has supposedly receded into the past (10). LaCapra explains "acting out" as the mechanism by which the subject of trauma re-enacts the traumatic event repeatedly but fails to integrate it into conscious experience (41).

Rachita is unable to sleep because of the fear that Anand's sister's face instilled in her. The stillness of the mountains was such that every time she shut her eyes, Anand's words came flooding back. Thus, nights became a dislocated time in which the linear progression of time was disrupted, and she lived in a state of non-linearity. What has changed is the affect or the manner in which the attack impacts her. It is now fear, or guilt, or anger, or hopelessness. The instability of her present, her insomnia, can thus be seen through the lens of trauma's "belatedness", as described by Caruth (17). "Traumatic recall" is belated because what is being recalled is not simply an event, but an event whose meaning has not yet been fully absorbed into experience (117).

The Book of Shadows explores the concept of temporal oscillation. Instead of narrating Rachita's story in a linear fashion from her college days to her relationship with Anand, her assault, her days in the hospital, and her subsequent movement to the hill house, the narrative is non-linear. The non-linear structure of the narrative, which disrupts the linear progression from cause to effect and from wound to cure, shows that Rachita's journey to healing is not linear. Instead of narrating her journey through her traumatic events in a linear fashion, the narrative shows Rachita oscillating through a cycle, and with each iteration of this cycle, she gains more understanding of her role in her story and the choices she has in life.

Thus, temporal mobility is as important to a novel as spatial mobility. In Rachita's journey from the city to the hills, her transformation is multi-layered. It is not just about her journey to the hills; it is also about her ability to negotiate

and manipulate time. Her memories begin to resurface, and she is able to look at them from a different perspective. She is also able to negotiate her self and time, thereby freeing herself from the sole traumatic incident that has dominated her. As she remarks towards the end of the novel, “my selfhood had for a while abandoned the confines of skin and bone, abandoned my cage and run away” (Gokhale 213).

However, the path to recovery from trauma is also full of barriers. Many times, remembering everything leads to being overwhelmed by memories. Rachita walks through her memories trying to deal with them in a way that exemplifies Cresswell's “constellations of mobility”, which is not limited to physical space but also extends to time (“Towards a Politics” 26). He explains that every individual's life is driven by the force that creates meaning from their experiences, the rhythm of their memories, and the friction that fills their lives (such as pain, fear, and guilt).

Spectral mobility can be studied through Cresswell's troika of “movement, representations, and practices” (“Politics of Mobility” 18). Here, movement is mental, representations are characters, roles, and scripts the subject ‘acts out’ in the mind, and practices are reading stories, daydreaming, and avoiding family relations. At the very least, Rachita's imaginatively induced spectral mobility seems to be about fleeing from her present situation. It has multiple effects, and it is the mediatory forms of her fiction that enable Rachita to acquire other personas and consequently to experience or act out different attitudes towards her trauma. Crucially, through her imaginative mobility, some of her self-hatred is shifted to the figures of her fiction.

Rachita stumbles upon the most elaborate instance of spectral mobility in the form of William Cockrell's *Journal of Missionary* that she discovers in the house. Cockrell, who was stationed in the hills far from the valley, believed the local people to be almost subhuman. He narrates his struggles in building the house and how the local people thwarted his efforts by objecting to the site of the house being inauspicious. As Rachita turns the pages of the journal, she is transported to nineteenth-century colonial India and inhabits the space of the male stranger who had lived in the house that had now become her shelter.

This documented journey explores a second constellation of mobility and power. It is brought to life through the imperial travels of Cockrell and his wife, Fanny, who lived an unusual amount of imperial mobility as they travelled from Britain to India and from the plains to the hills to establish themselves in a house on a piece of land that the local Indians thought was evil. In contrast to the imperial elite, the local population had their mobility constrained in a multiplicity of ways: through beliefs and practices, economic needs, and the apparatus of colonial rule. Cockrell's problem was solved by recruiting labourers from Bareilly. The house stands on a terrain of colonial-induced asymmetrical mobilities that "alter[s] space, to participate in its continuing production" (Massey, *For Space* 360).

Rachita's engagement with the journal and the lurking ghost exemplifies the movement that is embodied in the line that connects two points – the line which is "both meaningful and laden with power" (Cresswell, *On the Move* 9). Here, this line connects colonial and postcolonial ways of inhabiting the house and the different kinds of movements attached to them: different kinds of imperial and missionary travels, the forced movements of labour from the villages, and the modern academic's retreat from the world into the house. Imaginative and spectral movements complicate the straightforward idea of Rachita entering the house as an individual searching for personal healing. Her recuperation takes place in a space inhabited by the literal and metaphorical ghosts of historical violence and immense disparities of movement that have accompanied them.

While power is the principle of mobility in *The Book of Shadows*, gender is one of the principles of power that regulates mobility in the real world. The acid attack that disfigured Rachita was not an ordinary case of a woman seeking revenge for her partner insulting her. Rather, it was a gendered attack on the part of Anand's sister, who threw acid on Rachita while claiming that Rachita was involved in immoral sex and her body should be punished with shame. Anand's sister manages to turn her moral outrage to a lasting physical injury on Rachita's body. Her goal was not only to humiliate Rachita but also to deprive her of her future as a beautiful woman. This act of violence had immediate ramifications on her mobility. Suddenly, those five miles between her home and college seemed like a long distance. Fearing ridicule, mockery,

and harassment, Rachita avoided public spaces, evaded colleagues and students, and refused to look at herself in the mirror.

Rachita's gradual re-engagement with the mirror indicates an important shift in her journey. Her sister rings from Bangalore to tell her about a plastic surgeon who might be able to restore her face. Rachita looks into the mirror and is shocked to discover that "the deep disturbances in my self-image, my body ego, the sense of depersonalization that was dogging me, simply vanished" (Gokhale 218). She realises that the changes have not been so dramatic that she no longer recognises herself, that she does not miss her former self, and that she has come to accept her new state as legitimate. It is not simply a refusal of the feminine role but a movement towards visibility on her own terms.

Cresswell notes that every form of mobility experiences friction that both "hinders and enables mobilities" (*Handbook of Mobilities* 113). The main type of friction that Rachita faces is constraint — trauma, shame, and fear. As time passes, this friction is transformed into motive friction. It is the 'snap' that wakes Rachita to her various sources of empowerment. The three major events in the narrative that result in this empowerment are her sister's telephone call, the illness of Lohaniju, and the birth of Lady's puppies.

The three episodes together paint a narrative of Rachita's movement towards recovery through the transition from guilt to an interest in caring for others and to dynamism and sociability in her life. It is a deeply relational form of mobility with others (sister, caretaker, and dog) that facilitates her physical, emotional, and social motility. They form a network of relations that supports her bodily freedom, multiplies her motive forces, reduces the weight and burden of her movement, and opens up new possibilities for action.

From being a detached literary critic, Rachita transforms into an individual appropriating literature to her own needs and from a dummy to a person in her own right. She is fully aware of the importance of not losing herself. Throughout the novel, the protagonist proceeds on a simulated model: she poses as an English lecturer, a distant and unemotional person, and an ascetic living in the hills. Later, she begins to learn the difference between a model and imagination. Rachita realises that one can live in a false world of make believe, or that one

can create for themselves an image of existence or character with which one can identify themselves.

By the time Lohaniju dies and the house is filled with grief, Rachita has changed. She ponders whether she “will return to that other world, the world I have left behind” (Gokhale 231). She worries that if she stays in the house, she will be frozen in time. Her statement, “we must know what to hold on to, what to discard, in this radical flux which is life” illustrates her ability to cope with change (229). She is no longer longing for the complete erasure of her old life, but rather for the selective remembrance of it.

The home in Kumaon that was meant to be her safe permanent home becomes for her a transit point—a place where she has done her work of survival, but which she must leave in order to assert her existence in “time and space and dimension” (Gokhale 213). That she can leave the house that had become her abode implies that she has been able to regain her place in the social flow of life. Her determination to survive knows no bounds, and as the novel reaches its conclusion, Rachita regains her strength and holds hope for a future in which “the garden will bloom again” (229).

Thus, this article shows how a postcolonial novel about trauma and its recovery can be studied through the lens of mobility studies. Various forms of physical, temporal, and spectral mobilities and the frictions between them are exemplified in *The Book of Shadows*. The text explicates the representation of mobility and its relationship with power, gender, and history. It highlights the various forms of mobility that Rachita traverses in her journey from Delhi to the Kumaon hills, from the hospital to the haunted house, and from mirror refusal to self-discovery.

It discusses the physical and social structures that make her withdrawal possible as well as restrictive along the axes of class and gender. Rachita’s experience of time is non-linear, constantly oscillating between states of reliving the trauma through flashbacks, auditory hallucinations of traumatic sounds, and compulsive reenactments of the traumatic event until it is rendered manageable. Through her journey in the realm of the imaginary, where her personal memories, colonial texts, and ghostly narratives of the past intersect, this essay explores the multiple histories embedded in individual and personal

experiences. The house in Kumaon emerges as a critical site where these different trajectories intersect. Built on colonial ideas of space, the house becomes the site of a modern woman's struggle for independence.

Friction—trauma, guilt, gender, and the social gaze—is that thickening force that keeps Rachita confined and restricted within the domestic space. Through the three snapping events of her everyday—the call from her sister, Lohaniju's sickness and Lady's puppies—friction is transferred into a mobilising force that takes Rachita out of the home and into the wider world of action and care for others, and a dream of a more imaginative future beyond the drudgery and poverty of their present circumstances.

By the end of *The Book of Shadows*, Rachita is not fully cured, and the various scars on her body and psyche are not erased. Rather, she achieves a certain kind of 'meaningful [im]mobility': the ability to negotiate spaces of flow and stagnation, memory and oblivion, solitude and togetherness in a way that is neither one of rejection or unthinking assimilation. In a world marked by violence and an unequal distribution of mobility and access, Rachita is finally able to negotiate the flows and currents of life on her own terms, having struggled long and hard with the question of whether she ought to exist or not.

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