

Crafting Voices of Change: An Analytical Study of Character Representation in Namita Gokhale's The Things to Leave Behind

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Submitted: 20-Aug-2024 Revised: 30- Aug-2024 Accepted: 27-Sept-2024 Published: 31-Oct-2024



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DOI:
[10.5281/zenodo.17670640](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17670640)

Manuscript ID:
IJEWLPSIR-2024-010107

Volume: 1

Issue: 1

Month: October 2024

E-ISSN:3065-7873

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How to cite this article:

Mohurle, S. K. (2024). *Crafting Voices of Change: An Analytical Study of Character Representation in Namita Gokhale's The Things to Leave Behind*. *International Journal of English and World Languages & Literature Paradigm Shift in International Research*, 1(1), 24–26.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17670640>

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Abstract

Namita Gokhale's novel *The Things to Leave Behind* (2016) portrays the dramatic social and cultural shifts that occurred in nineteenth-century Kumaon under British colonial rule. This article analyzes Gokhale's technique of constructing characters to reflect conflicts surrounding identity, tradition, and changing societal values. Using postcolonial and feminist approaches, this study focuses on major characters such as Tilottama, Deoki, and Rosemary who represent different viewpoints shaped by power, culture, faith, and freedom. The paper highlights how Gokhale explores their emotional journeys, community roles, and ties to history and collective memory. By presenting multiple perspectives and psychological subtlety, the narrative foregrounds silenced voices who resist injustice and assert individuality. The study concludes that Gokhale's characterization not only revisits colonial history but also gives agency to women in shaping cultural consciousness and social transformation.

Keywords: Postcolonial identity; cultural resistance; feminist narrative; patriarchal society, cross-culture

Introduction

Indian English literature has evolved into a significant platform for expressing diverse cultural subjectivities and historical memories. Contemporary women writers, have played an essential role in reclaiming marginalized perspectives and revising patriarchal histories. Namita Gokhale is one such prominent figure whose fiction often highlights the social realities and cultural heritage of the Himalayan region. Her works explore spirituality, identity, colonial influence, and women's roles in society (Mandal, 2020).

The novel *The Things to Leave Behind* published in 2016, based on the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand during the late nineteenth century—an era marked by intense socio-political transitions caused by British imperial expansion and Christian missionary interventions. Gokhale does not merely retell history; instead, she reconstructs a world where ordinary individuals respond to change in personal and meaningful ways. Her characters, therefore, become vehicles through which history is not only recorded but also questioned, felt, and transformed (Prasad, 2019).

Central to the novel there are several strong characters who confront colonial structural dominance, social discrimination, and gender restrictions. Tilottama, a gifted widow-artist who preserves cultural motifs through her paintings, signifies the survival of indigenous art in a colonized world. Deoki, who endures personal trauma yet finds inner spiritual strength, symbolizes feminine resilience whereas Rosemary—a missionary woman—represents cross-cultural encounters shaped by the colonial gaze (Rajesh & Kumari, 2021). Through them, Gokhale presents history not simply as an external political development but as a deeply lived human experience.

Gokhale uses layered storytelling and multiple viewpoints to allow readers to witness diverse struggles and desires. Her storytelling thereby challenges homogeneous depictions of colonial India by focusing on regional cultures and everyday resistance (Singh, 2020). The novel further highlights that women, often ignored in mainstream historical narratives, contributed significantly to collective social awareness and reform. Thus, this paper examines how the craft of characterization in *The Things to Leave Behind* becomes a narrative tool through which Gokhale brings forward voices of change—asserting autonomy, preserving heritage, and resisting colonial domination.

Methodology

Through attentive reading of the book, this qualitative study uses textual analysis with an emphasis on symbolism, narrative style, and character development. Cultural identity, colonial influence, and gender oppression

are examined through the lens of postcolonial and feminist literary ideas. To enhance the understanding, a contextual approach also takes into account the historical and cultural backdrop of colonial Kumaon.

Literature Review

Scholars widely acknowledge Namita Gokhale as a significant literary voice who presents Himalayan culture and women's lived realities. Mandal (2020) observes that Gokhale bridges geographical and temporal distances by celebrating regional history in her fiction. Prasad (2019) argues that her work underscores cultural identity and resilience in a changing world. Rajesh and Kumari (2021) specifically explore colonial influence in *The Things to Leave Behind*, stating that Gokhale critiques imperialism while simultaneously portraying indigenous pride. Singh (2020) emphasizes the feminist dimension of her narratives, where women navigate personal agency despite social constraints. These critical perspectives confirm that the novel effectively blends historical research with human emotion and sociopolitical insight.

Character-wise Thematic Analysis

Tilottama- The Artistic Voice of Cultural Survival

Tilottama, the protagonist of the novel is brought up by her uncle Devi Dutt Pant and his childless wife, Saruli. Though she is an orphan, her childhood is very happy due to the three older relatives who take utmost care of the girl. When she turns six, they begin to search for a suitable match for her. Here the novelist throws light on the evil practice of child marriages. Tilottama escapes this child marriage due to the "inauspicious stars" in her horoscope. As a child, Tilottama witnesses the execution of her handsome and courageous uncle, Badri Dutt Uprety, a freedom fighter. Before his hanging, he declares that he is giving his life for the nation's freedom and the liberation of the land from British rule. The orphaned Tilottama deeply admires her bold and unpredictable uncle, whose courage plants in her the early seeds of bravery and resistance. Tilottama's creativity becomes an act of defiance against cultural erasure. He says to her, "Remember this my little Tillu, never be afraid, and do what you want. Not what you like, but what you want" (TLB: 37).

After marriage, Tilottama lives fearlessly and independently, defying traditional expectations of a submissive wife. Confident and self-assured, she manages life alone while her husband is away, earning both his respect and fear. Beneath her calm exterior burns a spontaneous inner strength that cannot be concealed. Tilottama embraced and admired a number of developments brought forth by the British, including new advancements in printing, transportation, the telegraph, and other scientific fields. When the family members talk about Deoki's marriage. She responds angrily, telling everyone that her daughter is too young to be married off and that she wants to educate her like Pandita Ramabai but she was remain silent before the final decision of her husband. She was quiet and did not enjoy Deoki's wedding rituals. As soon as she comes to know that Jayesh has converted himself into Christianity and living with his first love Rosemerry. Tilottama converted Deoki into Christianity and she says You are Christian. And so is she. You see before you Deoki Diana. She too has seen the light and found her faith. You can be man and wife in righteousness... In an impromptu ceremony, put together from her reading of Pandita Ramabai. Tilottama had taken a copy of the Holy Bible from her ever-expanding library and thwacked Deoki on the head. With it. "I now pronounce thee Deoki Diana". She had announced in a grave "English voice. Rest in peace. (TLB: 219)

Her art preserves traditional symbols that resist the colonial intrusion seeking to redefine values and aesthetics. Through her character, Gokhale highlights the unconventional yet powerful forms of resistance practiced by women.

Deoki- – Spiritual Strength and Emotional Healing

Deoki's journey reflects suffering transformed into strength. She is the second important character of the novel *Things to Leave Behind*. She is the dull daughter of Tilottama. It is due to the impact of India's great ladies she has decided to educate Deoki. But Deoki does not take interest in education, instead she is satisfied with household duties. Her resilience mirrors the collective endurance of women who maintain moral and emotional stability within families and communities during unstable times.

As for Deoki, nobody was really bothered about the implication of the whole drama on her life. Excommunication for her husband, widowhood for his wife- the stern patriarchy of the proud hill Brahmins could see no injustice in this. (TLB: 212-13)

Deoki faces immense hardship after her husband, Jayesh, is excommunicated for choosing to embrace Christianity out of love for an English woman. Torn between his failed affair with the English lady and his forced marriage to Deoki, a disillusioned Jayesh leaves for Mumbai, where he falls into a life of moral decline and wrongdoing. After being cast out, Jayesh embraces Christianity with the Church's blessings, where Reverend Boden warmly welcomes him. Renaming himself Jonas, he experiences a deep sense of spiritual rebirth and looks forward to a new and happier life with his beloved Rosemary. In a highly disturb mood Tilottama takes Deoki to Eden Ashram and introduces Deoki as Diana and insist Jayesh to accept her as his wife because she is Christian now. Ultimately Deoki stands as an emotional and moral figure within the communities during the unstable time.

Rosemary – The Colonial Outsider and Cultural Negotiation

Rosemary's missionary presence introduces tension between Western ideals and local traditions. Though she begins with a sense of cultural superiority, she eventually gains a deeper understanding of the people around her—

illustrating that cultural encounters can transform both sides. Together, these characters depict a society where oppression coexists with hope, and where every individual contributes to historical change.

Discussion

Gokhale's narrative shows that rebellion against colonial power does not always take the form of physical confrontation. Rather, resistance emerges through protection of culture, re-negotiation of gender roles, and psychological assertion of autonomy. By giving marginalized and female characters a central place in history, Gokhale reshapes dominant narratives and offers a more inclusive version of India's journey toward self-definition.

Conclusion

The Things to Leave Behind brings forward voices often missing from official historical accounts. Gokhale's art of characterization reveals how ordinary individuals—especially women—actively shaped societal change through their courage, emotional intelligence, and cultural commitment. Her novel reclaims local heritage from colonial suppression and foregrounds women as agents of transformation.

This study concludes that the representation of characters in the novel is not merely fictional—it symbolically records the struggles and achievements of countless real people whose stories shaped India's collective identity.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Principal, faculty members, and colleagues of the Department of English, Mahatma Gandhi Arts, Science and Late N. P. Commerce College, Armori, for their constant encouragement and support throughout this research work. I am especially thankful to my mentors and peers whose valuable insights, discussions, and suggestions have enriched this paper.

My sincere appreciation also goes to the authors and scholars whose works have been cited and referred to, forming the foundation of this study. Above all, I owe heartfelt thanks to my family and friends for their continuous motivation and patience, which made this research endeavor possible.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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