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# The Contours of Metaphysics and Historiography in Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind*

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### Abstract

Namita Gokhale's novel *Things to Leave Behind* is considered to be the most ambitious work of the writer. Having been published in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the novel is set during the second half of eighteenth-century India, which was a part of the British Empire. The novel attempts to incorporate and express the nationalist fervour of the times which were known for their multiple mutinies and interplay of conflicts between imperialism and nationalism. The study intends to understand the contours of Historiography and Metaphysics in the novel. The first part of the study shall distinguish itself from justifying the novel as historiographic metafiction and provide a brief introduction to the aforementioned terms. The second part of the study shall provide a brief introduction to the novel. The third part of the study shall investigate the contours of multiple concepts in metaphysics and how they are involved in interplay with the novel. The fourth part of the study shall locate the metaphysical perspective of the novel historically. The fifth and final part of the study shall submit the findings.

**Keywords:** *Metafiction, Metaphysics, Historiography, Namita Gokhale, Things to Leave Behind.*

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## 1. Introduction

The terms 'Metaphysics' and 'Historiography' might render themselves into a single generalized term coined by Linda Hutcheon in her book, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, "Historiographic Metafiction". Metafiction is a genre in which a production of a novel is demonstrated within the novel. *Jane Eyre* is a prototype of metafiction. When fiction assumes the authority of historiography and the metafictional essence, it is considered to be a "Historiographic Metafiction". According to Linda Hutcheon, examples of Historiographic Metafiction include *The Name of the Rose*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is a metafiction but it can hardly be located historically. Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* is a piece of historical fiction but it is not a metafiction since the novel pursues a third-person omniscient narration. This type of narrator knows everything about everyone in the novel. Historiographic metafiction invariably grounds itself in a postmodern aura and it continues to assert and scrutinize the fictionality of historiography.

Metaphysics is one of the three primary branches of philosophy. The other two are Ethics and Epistemology. According to Aristotle, Metaphysics is defined as the “study of nature and ourselves” (Wilburn). The realm of experience through senses marks the foremost essence of Aristotelian metaphysics. The term emerged through time with the works of various western philosophers. The questioning to mine existential realm begins with understanding the substance through the coexistence of form and matter. Metaphysical terms such as mind, matter, ideas and substance owe their general and foundational findings to Greek Philosophers. Scholars of metaphysics also speculate on the dialogue between determinism and free will. Metaphysics foregrounds itself with how reality is understood and shaped. The study of literature helps in shaping the way discourse constructs or reflects reality. At face value, this statement could stand valid for merely realist fiction, speaking from a postmodernist perspective, this could also be significant in understanding different kinds of the textual representation of reality.

Metaphysics also concerns itself with the relationship between universals and particulars. It is manifest that there is hardly anything universal in the postmodern age. It is also manifest that specific particulars dominate others while being disguised as universals. Out of the branches of metaphysics, the ones that are taken into account for the study are ontology and philosophical theology. Ontology concerns itself with becoming, being, reality and existence. The way these entities are grounded in the fictional world of *Things to Leave Behind* forms a crucial part of the study. As far as philosophical theology is concerned, the study intends to analyse the ramifications and manifestations of religion and how it is textually represented. The study also intends to understand the organic unity of metaphysical conceptions in their textual representation through the novel.

Historiography is defined as the study of history and the process in which it is produced. It involves the interpretation of written history and historical events. It also takes into account various historical elements such as historical theories and techniques deployed by historians. The relationship between history and literature is a dynamic yet problematic one which gets rendered further problematic in the universe of postmodernism. There are consistent interactions between texts of history and literature locating mutual implications of both in one another (Hutcheon 4). The manifestation of multiple disciplines through intertextuality is an inexorable characteristic of postmodern fiction. If a postmodern fiction set during its contemporary time can embrace intertextuality, a historical novel can do the same in a more obvious manner. It is not a new phenomenon to imply that the study of history is critical in the process of understanding literature and the way it is produced. Although, it is paramount to understand the historicity of literature. Locating elements of historiography, through intertextuality, forms an inevitable part of understanding the historicity of a fictional piece of writing, especially a historical one.

This is not to contend that Literature forms a valid source of history despite the fictionality of historiography. This is to merely infer that literature is also a form of discourse which can be located socio-historically. *Oliver Twist* brought to light the role and evils of child labour in the Industrial revolution which came to the historical world rather late (Williamson and Nardinelli). *Jane Eyre* provides a view of the way how women are treated differently from men and amongst themselves from a historical perspective. But none of the fictional pieces can be construed as an alternative to historiography. There are different schools of historiography such as Cambridge, Nationalist, Marxist and Subaltern. Cambridge School of historiography presents the history and its study from the perspective of the coloniser or the imperialist. The nationalist school of historiography presents the historical perspective of a national awakening and the recognition of native roots as opposed to the one constructed by the occidental colonisers. The Marxist school of thought in historiography emphasizes the existence of sociocultural transformations through time driven by class struggle. The subaltern school of historiography is a lot similar to the Nationalist school of thought with the only difference being its emergence through south Asian scholars. The study shall lean more towards the schools of thought in attempting to speculate on the different parts of the novel and the way they converge and diverge in the fictional unity observed by the author.

The relationship between historiography and metaphysics is not merely that of the individual and the general. The connection marks the process of historicising the thought process. The process undergoes mutual interactions with space, time, causality, being and nature. The conception of becoming and being forms a quintessential methodology of tracing history. History, by preserving memory and by continuing to protect and sustain it, possesses a dualist existence by being felt through senses and being felt beyond them. The relationship between sustenance of memory and retention likens to that of the culture and the physiological. This kind of relationship is beyond the scope of the study. The metaphysical theory is considered to be the centre of the philosophy of history, which could be traced to the lectures of Hegel published in the nineteenth century (Carr 80). Metaphysics and historiography possess interspersing contours which are to be understood and investigated in the paper.

The historical novel *Things to Leave Behind* by Namita Gokhale was published in the year 2016. It was a time when the market for Indian Fiction in English grew to accommodate various genres from financial thrillers to classics to pulp fiction. The times made a surge in the readability of novels that possess the potential for critical acclaim. The novel's emphasis on interpretations of history and its specific manifestations on individuals moots the study of the aforementioned concepts and their interplay. The novel is the third book of Gokhale's "Himalayan Trilogy". The first book of the trilogy is *A Himalayan Love Story* and the second one is *The Book of Shadows*.

The novel is set in different parts of North-Eastern and North-Western India, which was then a part of the British empire. Having been set during the first war of Independence or "Sepoy Mutiny", the novel is considered to be a "history of love" (pant). It has also been read from perspectives centred on desire and asceticism (Doshi). Love, being a metaphysical term possesses its own history which has an intricate relationship with the evolution of sexuality and gender. Romantic love is usually portrayed beyond sexuality forming a metaphysical abstraction. The transcendental motivation for deep respect and admiration dominates the metaphysical part of love (Moseley). The novel also demonstrates the genesis of modernity during times of imperialistic domination.

The novel begins with a woman being painted on a riverside listening to native songs from a distance. She begins to absorb her native roots as Dempster, the American, continues to paint her. She is attracted to him as much as she remains unable to be away from her roots. The forthcoming chapters describe the geographical locations and some imperialistic and nativist stories around it before beginning to narrate the story of the Brahmin pleader, Devi Dutt Pant and his family. From an economic perspective, the novel begins with the capitalist ethic of taking advantage of profit-making circumstances. They are considered to be the "new local elite" (Gokhale 19) who connected the European whites and dark-skinned rural folks. Devi Dutt Pant's Nephew is Tilottama, who is primarily featured in paratexts within the book. Tilottama's daughter Deoki is also another central character who encompasses specific points in history within her existence. The novel includes successful and failed marriages as a result of imperialist ambitions, and the shortcomings of the caste system and it traces the evolution from imperialistic attractions to nationalist consciousness.

The novel captures the turbulent times of the "Sepoy Mutiny" by portraying the ugly side of war, which is the cruel mob mentality. The mob mentality introduces Mary Jane and her marriage to Henry Boden after she escapes from the mob having lost every child of hers in the mutiny. Her daughter's connection with the pleader's family gets established through Deoki's Husband Jayesh Chandra Pant, who belongs to yet another family that profited through the coloniser's policies. The novel illustrates how there are shifts in political and intellectual ideology as it was in the first two parts of the Himalayan Trilogy. In *A Himalayan Love Story*, Masterji is portrayed as a person who flirts with the ideology of the British by considering them superior to the Kumaon tribes. In *The Book of Shadows*, the second book in the Himalayan Trilogy, the protagonist stays in a Victorian mansion after having undergone an acid attack. She engages herself with the narratives of the coloniser and the colonised. In the final book of the Himalayan Trilogy, the novelist portrays the interplay of love, patriotism, capitalism and casteism. The significance of the title is manifested when the characters leave their inherent conceptions behind as they come of age in the temporality used in the novel. Nain Chand Dutt

and his sister prove themselves futile in the plot until the inheritance of Tilottama and the martyrdom of her uncle comes forth. The dialectics of the caste system play a significant role in the description of characters and geographical locations along with their interplay. Tilottama's mother Durga's painting skills are revered across the Kumaon range and her fame does not disappear even after she drowns herself in the lake.

Tilottama is considered to be the protagonist of the novel not merely because she occupies much of the narrative but also because of the exceptional characteristics she possesses. Tilottama does not entirely rebel against the patriarchy for an astrologer's word delays her marriage by six years. She ends up getting married as an adult, an act which is considered to be rare during the era. When she gets married, she does not remain subservient to her husband. Nor does her act border on domestic violence. Her authoritative and intimidating vigour makes everything done according to her wish and will.

The struggle between nationalism and imperialism is the foremost characteristic of the novel. It is not merely the historical struggle which marked multiple protests, marches and hunger strikes. It is also the internal struggle of the citizenry against the ruling class. The Marxist Historian, Irfan Habib, considered the Indian Nationalist struggle as a kind of economic nationalism for it was, at first, carried forward by the elite merchants who were taxed more than their British counterparts. This does not hold true in Gokhale's novel at face value. The novel attempts to capture the Kumaon essence in the Freedom struggle which begins with appeasing of the Britishers by the bourgeois classes of India. This statement does not mean that the Indian hierarchy is similar to that of the western hierarchy, also known as proletariat and bourgeois. The Indian system of hierarchy is more complex and one that offers the least mobility.

Under British rule, a new local elite began bridging the walls of mutual incomprehension between the rural folk and the fair-skinned adventurers who had managed to wrest control ... Brahmins and Rajputs, were naturally astute while undertaking this role, while ... other trading classes had carved their own ingenious ways of benefitting from the Company (Gokhale 19)

The excerpt quoted above marks much of the essence imbibed by the central characters in the novel. The way they interact with the imperial machinery continues to be with the intent of gaining profit in terms of trade and commerce. There is a distinct shift in conceiving and articulating reason, being an existential purpose after the advent of the East India Company. Things take another turn when the control of the British Empire is taken by the Crown from the company. The turn happens after the "Revolt of 1857".

It is critical to understand "identity, causation, substance and kind" (Haslanger and Asta) to investigate the metaphysical aspect of anything. As far as the novel is concerned, they are not a singular entity, for the postmodern world is conceived to be encompassed by multiple identities, causations, substances and kinds. For a simple argument's sake, it could be said metaphysical entities are the ones that cannot be perceived through sense consciousness. The historical evolution of the freedom struggle contains multiple identities and causations at play. The interplay is manifested in the narration through the temporalities undergone by the characters in specific spaces.

In the beginning, it is seen that a local Thakur loses his claim for a lake because the caste system makes him feel too superior to learn swimming which is meant for the communities on the fringes. The writer also infers the Treaty of Sagauli (1816) and how it affected the border of India. She says the Kumaon hills are "blessed by the embrace of British Raj" (Gokhale 10). The treaty, in general, meant a widening of the British Empire encompassing the territory of Nepal, the country which shares its border with Kumaon. The writer, in attempting to capture the historical essence of the local sentiment portrays the entry of the British Raj as a development project as opposed to the Gorkhalis occupation. The entry stronghold of the British empire marks the beginning of changes within sentiments of the Dutt family.

Dutt's niece, Tilottama, after her mother Durga's death, is raised by Saruli and Devi Dutt Pant. When she turns six, the groom hunt begins as it was the practice during those times. The astrologer of the family asserts that Tilottama possesses ruling stars which are antithetical to harmony in the space of domesticity. The government pleader replies that Indians remain backwards and the west progresses due to regressive practices like astrology. Yet the pleader does not refuse to follow the final words of the astrologer: Tilottama shall not be married until her nineteenth year.

The effect of Tilottama's deceased uncle is manifest only by the end of the novel. The rebellious attitude of Badri Dutt Uprety remains despised by the entire family. Badri Dutt values patriotism and generousness as primary virtues to be held by every human being under the sun. He gets hanged by the act of Henry Ramsay during the rebellion of 1857. The death gets hidden from Tilottama for they possess no intention to traumatise her. When the war breaks out, the writer infers news reports to capture the different essences of patriotism and colonialism and the way they identify with themselves.

She infers reports from *The Illustrated London*, *The Lady Newspaper* and *Pictorial Times* to imply the prejudiced attitude of the British. The reports highlight the mob violence with disgusting details. These reports of historical significance mark the crisis of identity and the causational factors associated with it, thereby implying ontological significance. She also infers a report by Karl Marx who says,

It should not be forgotten that, while the cruelties of the English are related as acts of martial vigour, told simply, rapidly, without dwelling on disgusting details, the outrages of the natives, shocking as they are, are still deliberately exaggerated (Gokhale 32)

It is not merely these reports but also the conversations about those reports that include reactions of the local Paharis. The reactions to the revolt are largely mixed. There are voices of support and that dissent. When Tilottama learns of Badri Dutt's death by hanging, he remembers his words that guide her to go after what she wants without any fear of being intimidated. The escape of Mary Jane and her eventual marriage to Henry Boden marks a genesis for many other characters and the evolution of abstractions in the novel. Part two of the novel is titled "MODERN TIMES". The genesis of modernity and causational factors shall be investigated in this study along with their literary representation and historical significance. The logic and beliefs associated with modernity do not fall under the ambit of metaphysical investigation. Their identities and beings form a quintessential aspect of metaphysical existence. To understand their genesis, it is critical to understand their literary representation.

When Tilottama reaches nineteen years of age, the groom hunt resumes itself. The wedding between her and Nain Chand Joshi is arranged by the families of both sides as it has always been normative in the subcontinent. Nain Chand Joshi works as an officer of the Trigonometrical survey serving the empire for its documentation to plunder the nation. As a married woman living alone without her in-laws. Tilottama takes an indicative note of the existence of a pleader. The pleader Dutt profited as much as Nain Chand Joshi albeit in different ways. Nain Chand Joshi takes his calling to the mountains and gets profited for documenting it for the British. Initially, he shows off his knowledge about the mountains to his wife (Gokhale 51) which eventually changes when the wife begins to wear an overpowering presence which makes Nain Chand feel glad to be away from work for the most part.

After the marriage of Tilottama, chapters follow to describe the war of Independence and its connection with Mary Jane. Mary Jane loses her five children after her husband gets hacked to death. She decides to travel to the hills of Central India after having lost her entire family to the mutiny. She marries Henry Boden and dedicates her life to caring for the wounded in the leprosarium. Her two daughters mark their presence, temporally, when Tilottama's daughter Deoki begins to grow up. After her wedding, Tilottama persuades her husband to buy her a subscription to two newspapers: *Almorah Annals* and *Almorah Akbar*. With the costumes of her husband, she begins to fantasise herself as an

imperial officer. She tries to use her husband's compass as well. A family member of Nain Chand notices this and takes Tilottama to be a person with whom the undisguised Tilottama possesses an extra-marital affair. Yet she remains unfronted for everyone fears her. She begins to read Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. She speculates the reason why neither herself nor Ramabai was able to visit the marketplace of Almora town despite having understood the dimensions of power. The visit to the marketplace is not the only thing that Tilottama is unable to do. She is also unable to prevent her daughter from getting married as a young lady.

Nain Chand Joshi arranges a marriage for Deoki with Jayesh Chandra Pant. Jayesh manages the family business of selling digestive pills to people. He belongs to one of the communities that took advantage of the profit that came with being associated with the East India Company and eventually the crown. Jayesh remains connected to the empire but in ways radically different from that of his ancestors and the pleader. When he visits the leprosarium, he falls in love with Mary Jane's daughter. Unlike Tilottama, Deoki grows up as an obedient girl who does not care much about liberal education. Her untimely marriage irritates Nain Chand for he badly wishes to marry the daughter of Mary Jane.

He reads a lot of letters from his friends in Bombay who juggle jobs in many places. He wishes for an independent life. That is when he leaves his wife to become a Christian. His family members begin to perform death rituals on him. This provokes Deoki's mother who infers that these rituals care nothing about making Deoki a widow. So, she travels to the leprosarium and declares that Deoki will likewise become a Christian. Deoki tries to have her way, sexually with her husband who, without consent, engages in coital relations with her (Gokhale 231). Deoki's brief sexual encounters with the American painter, William Dempster, and her continued sense of attachment towards her husband signifies the leaning towards the imperialist and the nationalist. These kinds of love acts mark the metaphysical moments of Indian history running its contours through historiography in the genre of historical fiction, especially the novel *Things to Leave Behind*. Having been in love with Jayesh, Rosemary fails to make peace with the idea of Deoki and Jayesh engaging in conjugal activities. The combining tensions of everyone in the leprosarium stand witness to the changing times and ideals.

The others at the breakfast table did not, could not register the quite torture ...  
Rosemary was never very observant about worldly matters at the best of times, and the night of self-castigation has left her sleepless and exhausted. Jayesh was still brooding; he had not forgiven himself for his bodily transgressions of the night before (Gokhale 238)

The birth of Deoki's twins does not make anything better for Rosemary. Tilottama considers herself successful in the endeavour for her daughter cannot be left alone. Tilottama engages Deoki with the habit of reading but Tilottama's existence starts assuming a different perspective. She begins to become a nationalist and a racial one at that. She refuses to accept when Rosemary asserts herself as an Indian. She begins to believe that the revolt is indeed a war of Independence and that her uncle is a martyr.

The essence of metaphysics lies in the causating factors of culture that encompasses the existences of characters from the Brahmin pleader to Deoki. The cultural production is historically located in the novel along with the metaphysical leanings of the characters provide an ontological perspective of historical fiction.

## 2. Conclusion

The ideological dimension of the novel identifies itself through the character manifestation and the inferences of historical moments such as the Treaty of Sagauli. The cultural influence of the British and their assertion of superiority begins to dominate when the weaklings of the caste system are realised. The caste system is considered to be quintessentially Indian and that entangles the human psyche. The characters believe in their liberation by joining hands with the occidental culture. This does not mean that the occidental culture provides liberation to these characters.

The significance of the title is manifest for the characters to leave something behind for an existence they hope would be better. Such factors are causal which the result of the inadequacies they had perceived are in the existing culture. The metaphysics of being and identity with its nature is thus historically rooted in the novel.

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