

“Dear Traditions, Not My Body: A Feminist Exploration of Vedic Fertility Rituals and Female Bodies in Shakuntala: The Play of Memory”

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ABSTRACT

Vedic fertility rituals have long held sway over women's bodies, imposing societal standards that dictate their bodies, particularly around fertility. These practices often frame women as responsible for infertility or other perceived bodily inadequacies, subjecting them to ceremonies and rites that seek to "correct" or control their bodies. Such women are labeled with terms like banjh, or 'barren', and forced to undergo fertility rituals. This research engages with feminist and cultural lens and examines the complex relationship between these ritual practices and the female body, focusing on the negative social impacts of these rituals on women. Through a critical study of Namita Gokhale's "Shakuntala: The Play of Memory" (2016), this paper explores how the novel's protagonist resists the ritualistic impositions forced upon her, which demand conformity and obedience, particularly around childbearing. As she voices her resistance—remarking, "I could never understand rituals, why some things had to be one way rather than another"—she embodies a defiance that underscores the arbitrary and restrictive nature of these traditions. It is found that these rituals have historically oppressed women and that autonomy over one's body is central to the reclamation of female identity.

Keywords: cultural studies, feminism, female bodies, Namita Gokhale, vedic studies