

Transcending the Sexual Barriers: A Study of Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*

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Abstract: This research paper aims to scrutinize and delve into the intricacies of the sexual behavior exhibited by female characters in Namita Gokhale's novel *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother*. Throughout their journey towards sexual autonomy, these women grapple with societal norms, recognizing their place in the conventional order. In a bold act of rebellion against stereotypes, they endeavor to reclaim their individual identities, choosing a unique path that challenges established norms and empowers them to shape their own destinies. Examining themes of intimacy, desire, and societal constraints, this paper aims to unravel the intricate layers of Gokhale's narrative approach. Through a critical lens, it explores how the author navigates and challenges established norms, offering readers a nuanced understanding of human connections and the evolving dynamics of sexuality within the context of her literary work.

Key Words: Sexuality, Subordination, Desire, Barriers, Identity, Empowerment.

Sexuality plays a crucial role in the human experience, where the union of males and females goes beyond the simple act of reproductive continuation. Unlike many animal species, human sexuality encompasses a spectrum of dimensions, extending beyond its biological function. It influences societal structures, shapes psychological well-being, and even touches upon spiritual aspects, highlighting the intricate layers that transcend mere reproductive purpose in our complex existence. Human beings exist within the fabric of families and society, possessing and desiring to retain land and property under their names. The act of giving birth to offspring serves the dual purpose of inheritance, allowing the new generation to succeed to their possessions, and contributing to a sense of immortality as succeeding generations perpetuate the names of their forebears even beyond their demise. Consequently, sex assumes a social significance in this context.

Beyond its social implications, sex is also a fundamental biological need. Both males and females derive pleasure from sexual intercourse, tapping into its emotional healing power. This intimate act becomes a canvas for

expressing love in a profound manner. Moreover, beyond its bodily aspects, sex holds psychological significance, serving as a means to relax minds and acting as a safety valve for the release of pent-up frustration and anxiety.

For human beings sex has a spiritual significance too. Human life is supposed to be a combination of body and soul. Especially Indian mythology believes that there is a soul in every human body. Whereas the body is mortal but the soul is immortal. It only changes bodies as human beings change dresses. Indian mythology believes that the real essence of human beings is their souls. Body is the transient and material but the soul is the real self which must be known. There are various ways to know it. One way is through meditation. Another way is through religion. Some think intellect is the appropriate way to realize the self.

Sex is also a way, in some philosophies, to achieve self-realization. It is through sexual intercourse that male and female achieve self-fulfillment. An acclaimed spiritual thinker Osho opines that sex is the first step towards 'super consciousness.' He opines that sex is an energy that can be transformed to spiritual heights to realize one's real self. He explains the science behind sexual desire. He argues that "The craving is not for the body of a woman by a man or vice versa, the passion is for something else: for egolessness, for timelessness" (Osho 31). In the moments of orgasm the sexual partners forget about their bodies and for a moment they forget time. In this state of egolessness and timelessness they encounter their real self.

Thus, Sex is a multifaceted concept, encompassing biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. However, as civilizations have progressed, it has evolved into a taboo subject constrained by intricate moral and societal frameworks, often intertwined with religious beliefs. Despite the societal expectations placed upon both men and women to adhere to codes and customs related to sexuality, it is crucial to recognize that historical societal structures have been predominantly male-dominated, with men assuming the role of law-makers.

Within such patriarchal frameworks, men generally enjoy more sexual freedom than women. Numerous barriers limit women's autonomy in matters of sexuality, hindering their self-fulfillment and realization. In these settings, women encounter restrictions during menstruation, being deemed impure and advised to refrain from kitchen activities and religious practices. Additionally, societal norms dictate that women should not initiate sexual intercourse, instead being expected to be submissive and subdued during copulation. Expressing pleasure through moans and groans is stigmatized, associated with characteristics attributed to prostitutes. Another prohibition extends to female masturbation.

As daughters, women are expected to uphold discipline and preserve their virginity. Pre-marital sex is often condemned as a sin, and becoming an unmarried mother is considered unthinkable. In marriage, women are expected to fulfill the role of a dutiful wife, satisfying their husband's desires, taking a vow of fidelity, and even tolerating husbands engaging in relationships with other women. Both pre-marital and extra-marital sex is viewed as sinful acts within this societal framework. These sexual barriers and expectations, deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, underscore the challenges women face in navigating their own sexual autonomy and individual fulfillment. All these

ideologies about women's sexuality act as barriers for women. Like men, women also have a natural desire for sexual fulfillment and self –assertion, but unlike men, they suffer barriers at every step. They have to repress their sexuality which results into their physical, mental and spiritual illness.

However, time is changing now. With the advent of the Feminist critical theory issues related to women's sufferings and need for equal rights for them got voice. The term 'Feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'Femina' that means 'Woman.' It advocates women's rights, status and equality as enjoyed by men. It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved as a significant literary theory. The focus of the literary studies was shifted to women's writing with a view to re-interpret it in the light of long existing gender-bias and sexual politics in history, culture, society, family, language and literature.

Particularly the twentieth century has witnessed a great shift of attitude. Because of the advancement of science and technology and access to information technology through T.V., Radio, Newspapers, magazines and social medial there is awareness among women. Women, who were compelled to remain inside the four walls of the houses, now have started exercising their rights for equality or at least asking for it. Now the tendencies are shifting where women are aware of their subordination and asking equal rights. Novelists, particularly women, are writing a:

. . . literature [that] is making attempts at creating and reflecting a new social order which no longer wishes to doom women to immanence but rather considers them autonomous and transcendent, instead of imprisoning women's thought in a patriarchal frame work allows women the full right of the free conscience to create its own values. (Kaur, xiv)

With the advent of feminist criticism and gender studies these ideologies are interpreted as barriers in the emancipation of women. It is believed that these ideological barriers are not natural but are created by men to retain power and dominance. The ideologies that women are naturally weak and subordinate are challenged by feminist writers. One of the most challenging authors is an acclaimed feminist and existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She, in her epoch making work *The Second Sex*, challenges the concept of being a woman itself. She pronounces that:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . described as Feminine. (Beauvoir 249)

It is a very significant and thought provoking remark to understand women's oppression. She argues that *woman* is a social construct. One is born as either male or female biologically, but it is the society that conditions them as man or woman. The patriarchal social system has created a myth of Eternal femininity which mystifies woman. She is represented as man's *Other*. Man occupies the dominant role and is transcendental whereas woman

is assigned the subordinate role and is in immanent role. Simone de Beauvoir asserts that as there is no such thing as eternal masculine, similarly the myth of eternal feminine is just an ideological barrier.

Feminists try to reveal the effects of these stereotypes, representations and ideologies on the lives of women. They find art and literature as the most powerful instrument through which ideology is propagated and unequal power relations are naturalized. Judith Butler is of the opinion that “What is incisive and valuable in feminist work is precisely the kind of *thinking* that calls into question the settled ground of analysis” (Butler 6). Similarly Parmod K. Nayar also opines that it is the stereotypical cultural representation of women that is responsible for their oppression “Cultural texts naturalize the oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object or as a procreating device” (Nayar 83).

As far as Indian- English Literature is concerned, many women novelists have dealt with the theme of feminist consciousness in their works. They have created various immortal women characters in their novels who represent the rise of new woman. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, Gita Mehta, Uma Vasudev and Bharti Mukherjee etc have dealt at large with the problems and difficulties faced by their women characters and eventually overcoming these problems to assert their autonomy and independent identity. Their major concern has been the Indian woman’s quest for identity.

Amongst the contemporary women writers Namita Gokhale is a major voice in the fictional world of Indian English literature. She has received name, fame and critical acclaim both in India and abroad. With the publication of her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, in 1984, Namita Gokhale made her first signature in the literary world. This novel created uproar in the literary circles because of its daring and frank sexual narration. After this success she never looked behind. So far Namita Gokhale has authored fourteen books, including eight works of fiction. Other than *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, her fiction includes *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994), *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows* (1999) *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, (2005) *Priya: In Incredible Indya* (2011), *The Habit of Love* (2012), *Things to Leave Behind* (2016).

Dominant themes of the writings of Namita Gokhale include musings on literature, contemporary literary practices, the place of women in Indian society and the world at large as well as myth and its bearings in the modern world. In her works she presents personal stories facing various conflicts in the background of culture. Her works explore social changes in India and clash between the traditional codes and modern aspirations. Her real concern is with the exploration of human psyche and especially grounds on which male-female psyche works. Her works set a genre of its own by complete break from traditional fiction in respect of matter, technique and language.

Namita Gokhale is best known for depicting a world of rebellious and emancipated women characters in her works. She is considered as the champion of women’s cause in contemporary Indian English Fiction. She is deeply concerned for the welfare of women. Women characters in her novels make an attempt to shake of the various kinds of barriers. She projects the image of the modern women who refuse to remain shadowy beings of men. They assert

their autonomy and utilize their sexuality, gender identity and their inner strength to come out of men's shadow and achieve identity of their own.

She has created a plethora of women characters in her novels who face many barriers in their assertion of autonomy. However, they make an attempt to rise, challenge and eventually transcend those barriers successfully. They try to break away from the shackles of patriarchal social set up as it poses hindrance in their development. The ways adopted by them may vary but the aim is same i.e. to transcend the barriers.

Namita Gokhale, in her novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, fearlessly confronts societal sexual barriers by crafting female characters entrenched in the profession of courtesans. This occupation, traditionally regarded as disrespectful for women in both societal and moral contexts, becomes a canvas through which Gokhale's characters, endowed with intelligence and determination, not only embrace their chosen path but also assert their autonomy. These women navigate societal norms with resilience, maintaining power and position, challenging stereotypes associated with their profession. Gokhale's narrative serves as a bold exploration of the complexities surrounding women's agency and societal expectations.

Ammi, the *grandmother* of the narrator Gudiya, is a rich Muslim courtesan in the novel. She lives in a big haveli with her daughter, granddaughter and younger brother. Many Nawabs and Englishmen come to her Kotha. She sings beautifully and maintains importance among those people and her customers. She has a daughter, but she does not know who the biological father of this daughter is.

Later, some circumstances force her to leave haveli and she comes to Delhi nameless and penniless. There she through her indomitable will and survival instinct, leaves behind her identity of a Muslim courtesan and becomes a Hindu priest of a make shift temple. Soon she attains the position of a 'saint'. She lives her life with dignity and even after her death she remains influential figure in the lives of other characters.

Similarly, the daughter of Ammi, unnamed but referred to as "mother" by the narrator Gudiya, is also a courtesan employed by Ammi to attract customers through her beauty. Like Ammi, she lacks a husband and is the mother of Gudiya, the narrator of the novel. Gudiya reveals the absence of knowledge about her father, a fact shared by both her mother and grandmother. She states "I did not even know who my father was and neither, for a fact, did my mother or grandmother" (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 104).

Gudiya's mother demonstrates her sexual autonomy by eloping with a harmonium player from Ammi's group. Although she returns home disheartened due to the player's betrayal, this setback does not permanently disturb her. In a subsequent turn of events, when they must vacate their haveli, she once again elopes, this time with a beggar named Riyasuddin Rizvi. This narrative portrays her transcending sexual barriers, pursuing self-fulfillment, and asserting her sexual autonomy.

Gudiya, the narrator of the novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is the central character of the novel. She takes her grandmother and mother as her role models. From her grandmother she learns the survival instinct, determination to overcome adverse circumstances. She is fascinated by the romantic and adventurous nature of her mother. She wants to become like her. She confesses that “there was nothing I wanted more than to be like my wicked waylaid mother” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 29).

It is because of the impact of her grandmother and mother that she does not stick to the male-made ideologies about women’s sexuality. She does not find fault with menstruation. When she begins her menses, she is rebuked by her grandmother and Phoolwati too tries to tell her about the ideology about impurity of menstruating women. But she does not accept the fact silently. She questions Phoolwati and protests “It’s not my fault’ . . . ‘I haven’t done anything wrong. First grandmother gets upset and now you! Why, Phoolwati?” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 55). Reaching the adolescent age, she becomes aware of her physical charms and beauty. She wants to enter into the world of romance like her mother. She confesses that:

I was beginning to realize that I was beautiful and the thought exhilarated me. I wanted to enter the world of glamour and excitement, a world I did not know and which, quite unfoundedly, I assigned with my absent mother. (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 68)

Gudiya’s aspiration to emulate her mother is not a mere whimsy; she transforms it into a tangible reality. Following in her mother’s footsteps, Gudiya becomes enamored with a young and handsome boy affiliated with the Shiv Mohan Band. Her infatuation with his beauty is so intense that she does not make an effort to learn about his name, background, or parentage. It is Pandit Kailash Chander Shastry who bestows upon him the name Kalki, the scourge of the Kaliyuga.

Gudiya’s love for him is so profound that she willingly engages in a physical relationship with him before marriage, highlighting the depth of her emotions and her willingness to challenge societal norms in pursuit of love and self-determination. She goes to a marriage where she enjoys her first sexual encounter with Kalki. She narrates the incident:

I was ravenously hungry, but my stomach was contracting with an even more powerful desire, and I knew that I was irrevocably in love . . . After I had eaten, he kissed me again, and then he fumbled for the drawstring of my pyjamas. This time I experienced the full glory of sex, I shuddered with absolute convulsions of ecstasy, and he had to put his hand to my mouth to stop my moans. (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 154)

As the result of this love-making, Gudiya becomes pregnant before marriage. An unwed mother is condemned in society, so Phoolwati and Sundar forces Kalki to marry Gudiya. Kalki loses interest in Gudiya after making love to her. Gudiya, however, loves him whole heartedly but now she does not want to marry him. But she has to marry him because she cannot abort the child because of a matured pregnancy.

She narrates that, “I no longer wanted to marry Kalki. The only option was an abortion. But we consulted another lady doctor and [we] were told that an abortion was no longer possible, as the pregnancy had progressed too far” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 209). She marries Kalki after Phoolwati’s practical advice that the child will have a legitimate father. In marriage, Gudiya’s conjugal life with Kalki is far from emotional satisfaction. She develops an appetite for sex. However, Kalki’s passion was for her body only. She narrates:

He was cool with me sexually and for the most part ignored me altogether. Sometimes, inexplicably, his lust would be aroused, and he would devour me with an animal passion that took me unawares. I had developed a voracious appetite for sex, and, although my girlish infatuation for Kalki had long since subsided, he could arouse another woman inside me who I never knew had existed. (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 215)

This suggests that Kalki’s attraction to Gudiya is primarily physical, but she refuses to allow herself to be exploited by him. Instead, she takes a proactive step by encouraging him to go to Bombay to pursue his career, while she herself returns to Phoolwati’s house. Living independently with her daughter Mallika, Gudiya discovers a sense of relaxation in the absence of Kalki. This act of sending Kalki away becomes symbolic of her newfound liberation and asserts her autonomy, showcasing her ability to make decisions that prioritize her well-being and personal growth. This narrative twist in Namita Gokhale’s novel highlights Gudiya’s strength and agency, as she navigates complex relationships, asserts her independence, and shapes her own destiny.

Another important and powerful woman character to transcend the sexual barriers in the novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is Phoolwati. She is the widow of Shambhu who, before he died, used to run a tea shop in front of Ammi’s temple. She comes to Delhi after Shambhu’s death. Gudiya calls her “a plump and attractive woman with the most enormous bosom possible” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 26).

Unlike any other traditional Indian widow she does not live a life of rejection or austerity. She befriends Sundar Pahalwan and indulges in amorous and flirtatious relationship with him. She calls him home in exciting manner:

Such a Dara Singh bulk of a man, but with the courage of a mouse! Why are you so scared of Phoolwati, man? Will she bite you? Will she eat you up? . . . You want to discuss business with me, don’t you? Then say so! Come to my home at seven this evening, and we can discuss whatever you want to! (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 105-06)

In the evening when Sundar visits Phoolwati’s house, Gudiya indicates the sexual encounter between Phoolwati and Sundar. She narrates, “Sundar Pahalwan stood patiently by the bed awaiting sentence. Phoolwati’s painted fingernails were positioned on her heaving bosom, and there was a look of anticipation on her face. They did not notice as I crept out of the hut” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 109). Very soon Phoolwati consents to the marriage proposal of Sundar Pahalwan. However, she puts some marriage conditions before him, which he accepts

happily. Thus she marries him and lives a blessed conjugal life with him until he is murdered towards the end of the novel.

To sum up, in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Namita Gokhale crafts a narrative that unfolds with the resilience of strong women characters. These women, portrayed with depth and nuance, boldly assert their sexual autonomy and navigate life on their own terms. Embodying emancipation, they transcend societal sexual barriers that would otherwise impede their paths to self-realization. Gokhale's novel serves as a compelling exploration of the complexities surrounding female agency, challenging stereotypes and presenting a powerful narrative of women forging their own destinies. In the tapestry of *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* Namita Gokhale weaves a poignant narrative that resonates with the strength and resilience of her female characters. Through the experiences of these women, Gokhale unveils a rich tapestry of autonomy and self-discovery, as they boldly challenge societal norms and transcend sexual barriers. The novel stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of emancipated women who navigate their paths with determination, asserting their sexuality and autonomy.

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