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# A New Vision of Matriarchal Society created by Women in Gods, Graves & Grandmother

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## Abstract

Gods, Graves and Grandmother is the second novel of Namita Gokhale in which her women characters show immense courage to overcome difficulties of their lives. Namita Gokhale's woman is self-dependent as to face the misfortunes of her life without help of man. Her woman is a New Woman totally different from her traditional image. Instead of mild, submissive, self-sacrificing woman, she emerges as conscious resourceful, confident, dynamic, aggressive and acquiring a new identity. She occupies a position in male dominating society. This novel is dominated by women characters, in which male characters are merely supporter and performers of secondary roles. Ammi, Gudiya and Phoolwati create a world of their own where women dominate. They do not surrender against the circumstances and emerges into new strong women. Novel deals with the story of Kothawalis (Prostitutes) living in a haveli of hundred and thirty-seven rooms. Grandmother (Ammi) runs a kotha with her daughter. They are found guilty in a murder case and are forced to leave comfortable kotha and compelled to take shelter in slums of Delhi. Ammi, Gudiya and Phoolwati constitute their world of own without any male support. Ammi's positive attitude of life

and her innate inventiveness enables her to start a new life with the collecting strength of Gudiya, Phoolwati and Leela. Present paper critically examines women ability and their victory over troubles inflicted on them. The presented study projects Namita Gokhale as a writer who deals with the multifarious women's experiences and various issues concerning self and society.

**Keywords:** free, life, positive, self-dependent, strong, warrior.

## Introduction

Namita Gokhale's novels are mostly all about women. Namita Gokhale reveals her keen concern for the welfare of women. Her all the protagonists have followed the course and concerns of her own life: whether as a little child, adult lady, career oriented or as married woman. Everywhere woman has to face discrimination, sense of insecurity, sexual harassment to which she is exposed is their world. Namita Gokhale effectively demonstrates the multiple levels of sexual depravity among man and women. She tries

to show the women struggling to break the culturally or traditionally imposed identity on them by asserting her sexual needs. She has realistically portrayed woman in her novels. Namita Gokhale is one of the women writers who explored the famine consciousness of woman character, their evolution towards an awakened conscience and enrichment of their inner self in a male dominated society. She has successfully portrayed the insensitive fatality of society given to its woman. She has recorded the pains, tensions and fears of contemporary educated and illiterate woman who bravely fights against adverse conditions and emerges as a warrior leaving all her pains behind.

Novel deals with the story of Kothawalis (Prostitutes) living in a haveli patronized by the rich zamidars, merchants and even the Sahibs. Grandmother (Ammi) runs a Kotha with her daughter. They are found guilty in a murder case and are forced to leave comfortable Kotha. They are compelled to take a shelter in slums of Delhi. Narrator's (Gudiya) mother becomes bald due to venereal disease, runs away with the beggar, Riyasuddin Rizvi. He meets them at the Jhansi Railway station. Ammi with her granddaughter Gudiya finds herself on the streets of Delhi. Gudiya Describes their condition: "When my mother went away, my grandmother and I were left to fend for ourselves. I have always been given to believe that we had once been enormously rich but at that time we were on the very verge of penury." (1)

Ammi's positive attitude of life and her innate inventiveness enables her to set up a makeshift, ramshackle temple under

the peepal tree behind their Jhuggi. Even though they are Muslims, the old women act as the Pujarin of the temple, collecting the proceeds, accruing from the offerings made by the devout. Ammi is too old to be service to her clients as a prostitute but she possesses a melodious voice to sing bhajans. Ammi's bhajans enralls the audience and turns them into committed bhaktas, who do not grudge the amount while making their offerings. The temple continues to prosper, and expand as the generous offering multiply manifold. Phoolwati is another character of the novel who comes from village after murder of his husband Shambhu. Shambhu runs a tea shop where Ammi lives. Shambhu has an affair with Magoo, the labourer at the construction site. Magoo's husband the labourer Saboo murders shambhu along with her. Phoolwati comes to Delhi for funeral of Shambhu.

Ammi, Gudiya, Phoolwati and Lila these four women constitute their own world of women in which they live their lives according to their own desire without any help of man. They have to struggle to survive. They are powerful enough to command the situations they face, the men come into their contact are subdued before them. Women of Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* have positive outlook towards life. They are self-dependent which enables them to face the harsh realities of life. **Subhash Chandra** observes: "They eminently succeed in carving a niche for themselves in the male dominated society, and prove to themselves and other that woman is equal to man when it comes to crisis management and survival in the face of destructive social forces. They

turn their selves into subjects, performing acts and desiring man and things. They proved themselves to be achievers in the face of odds society necessarily places in the way of women. Rather than conform to some definition of woman by the social system, those women succeed in defining themselves.”

**Ammi as a strong pillar of the story**

Ammi is a woman who does not bow down before her mis-fortunes, she bravely faces the world and financially set herself well. Being a Muslim Kothewali, Ammi set up a makeshift, ramshackle temple under the peepal tree behind her Jhuggi. Gudiya tells us about the shrine:

“When my mother went away, my grandmother and I were left to fend for ourselves. I had always been given to believe that we had once been enormously rich, but at that time were on the very verge of penury. We would indeed have starved had not my resourceful grandmother stolen a marble slab from the building site behind our shanty. This marble-clean, cold and veined with the merest hint of green shadows-she placed beneath the holy peepal tree which shaded our little hut. Then she found five rounded river stones, purloined them, really, from a Sahib's rockery and arranged them on the marble altar and our shrine was complete.” (1)

Ammi belongs to a family of singing prostitutes, so she used her

melodious voice in singing bhajans. Although she was not well versed in the higher tenets of Hinduism, she quickly took bhajan singing and often uttered with ease "Arre Rama, Rama, Rama" (12)

When Gudiya ask her Ammi how she know these songs, she replies:

“In my mother's lap’, she replied, ‘In her lap, just as you are sitting in mine. Arre, Gudiya these religions, what should I tell you, they are a type of fashion Bombay cut, Calcutta style, London look.” (13)

Ammi is a practical lady, instead of shedding tears, she overcomes all the difficulties and obstacles of life. She is a woman who is the owner of high confidence and determination which enables her to survive her life. She constructs a make shift temple and convert into commercial establishment. When the man from Municipal Corporation comes with demolition order for 'Pucca cement structure' where Ammi and Gudiya lives, he falls at grandmother's feet and begs her forgiveness for the blasphemy.

Ammi's life changed completely from her earlier betrothal life. Though she belongs to a Muslim family, she involves herself thoroughly in devotion of God. As Gudiya says:

“My grandmother began to believe in God. She took to fasting four days a week. Even when she was not fasting, she would eat just fruits and nuts and sometimes a little yogurt. She took a vow of silence and

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remained completely mute for a month, crouched silently in a corner of the temple, her stubborn eyes resisting any questions or answer or any kind of communication with anyone.” (27)

Lila, an old lady becomes blind follower of Ammi. Even Pandit Kailash Shastri a scholarly person, well-versed in religious rituals, accepted Ammi as his superior in religious and spiritual matters. Once Pandit Shastri object to keep Brahma Ji's idol in temple and calls temple resembling a doll's house which is not built according to Vaastu shastra, she replies with her usual vague generalizations. Says Gudiya:

“She had now perfected the art of presenting confusing abstractions as exalted philosophy and converted her lack of specific religious knowledge into a gnostic strength. ‘It is all Lord Krishna's leela,’ she said obscurely, her garbled speech adding a further veneer of wisdom to her words. ‘Sab guddi gudde ka khel hai!’” (67)

Pandit Kailash Shastri becomes so much influenced at one stage; he says:

“I can sense that she is an extraordinary woman with remarkable siddhis.” He told Lila and Phoolwati, “If even the dust from her mind were to settle on an ordinary mortal like me, I

would become a better and cleverer person.” (58-59)

Pandit Shartry then gives her the title 'Saint'. According to **Sharad Shrivastava**: “Ammi uses her show of 'virtue' and her 'silence' to successfully manipulate the male dominated society. She handles Pandit Kailash Shastri by her silence and vague generalizations about theology and Sunder Pahalwan by her show of virtue and piety.”

Ammi has business-like practicality which enables her to come to clutches with insurmountable troubles that pursue her and her granddaughter life. Ammi is presented to us not only as a person who makes a success of her life in a highly competitive world, but also, she is shown reacting spiritual mystic heights which few women are known to attained in or outside of literature with the help of Phoolwati, Sundar Pahalwan and Pandit Shastri, Ammi was able to turn the temple into a commercially workable place and a means of livelihood. She handles temple with iron hand. She wants everything to be perfect. The premises are kept clean, the inner members of devotees is assigned different tasks for the smooth running of the temple. Having achieved her aim of eking out of livelihood, Ammi gradually increases her 'abstraction', detachment and 'inexplicable remoteness' thereby lending a mystical charm and aura to her personality. That's why her death being described as attaining maha- samadhi by voluntarily relinquishing her consciousness to the larger universe.

In Ammi Namita Gokhale displayed a woman who never accept defeat, she displayed presence of mind where needed.

**Janki Venkatraman** analyses Ammi's sense of utilizing the available recourses: "Ammi, who knows only too well that in social situations, religion is merely convenient disguise to wear, begins her saintly career with a piece of purloined marble, rocks stolen from a neighbourhood rockery, and firm faith in her own ability to belt out soul-stirring bhajans. Her ascendance to mystic status, and relative financial security is swift and unstoppable."

### **Gudiya as a deprived child**

Gudiya, the narrator of the story and granddaughter of God Mother Ammi is another strong character of the novel who learns many things from her grandmother. Gudiya lives in the company of her grandmother after her mother's elopement with a beggar Riyasuddin Rizvi. As in the very beginning we come to know by Gudiya that she is not aware of her father when she looks herself, she imagines that she had inherited pale-gold skin from some Afghan or Phirangi customer of her mother. When Ammi sets up a temple under Peepal tree, Gudiya is quite unfamiliar to religions and Gods as well. Gudiya remained deprived of love and affection throughout her life. Her mother elopes with a beggar and left Gudiya to her grandmother. Her grandmother takes care of her until she gets involved in her sainthood.

Grandmother's negligence towards Gudiya after so much involvement in God and divinity hurts her very much. She craves for grandmother's affection which a growing child needed. She casually attends the school as she has a strong desire to become rich and famous. Her principal Mrs. Roxanne encourages her to study and become an I.A.S officer. When Malvika

Mehta, her new teacher takes a counseling session and ask what all the girls want to achieve and why? Gudiya answers that she is going to become a film star and marry the Prime Minister's son. She wants to be the richest woman in the world and travel by aeroplane. This, she thinks is possible because Ammi taught her that anything is possible if one aspired. But **Sharad Shrivastava** points out: "The route to success through education does not appeal her. Her admission to Roxanne Lamba's English Medium school does not inculcate any higher ideals in her, nor does she have any desire for an impressive career. She can never associate success with studies- in fact, she has abhorrence for all kinds of education. The easiest curse for such girls is to use their body to achieve their goals."

Gudiya always dreamed of handsome and good-looking Prince. So Gudiya intensely falls in love with the young, handsome bandwallah who seems to her Prince of her dream. He was named Kalki, the scourge of the Kalyug by Pandit Kailash Shastri. Gudiya falls intensely in love with Kalki that she does not delay to establish relationship with him. Consequently, she becomes pregnant. When Phoolwati comes to know about her pregnancy, she with help of Sundar Pahalwan, forces Kalki to marry Gudiya. Because it is necessary that the unborn child must have a father so that he would be called an illegitimate child. Kalki's behaviour changes after forced marriage as he was reluctant for it. Kalki behaves brutally with Gudiya and even beat her cruelly. Gudiya becomes disappointed with Kalki's behavior. Phoolwati advised her not to waste her life with the bandwallah.

Gudiya herself realizes after a few months of an unhappy married life, that she can't waste her life with Kalki, Phoolwati advises her to consider her husband Kalki a disposable being'. Gudiya makes up her mind. She sells her jewellery and gets a ticket for Bombay to send Kalki to try his luck in films.

Gudiya remained an unfortunate child from the beginning. Her mother elopes with a beggar and she had to spend a motherless childhood. Though Ammi loves her very much, she indulges too much in her divine life, that she forgets Gudiya which hurts her badly. Phoolwati supports her after her grandmother becomes indifferent towards her. When Gudiya's menses began, Phoolwati explained her about womanhood. She becomes overwhelmed with Phoolwati's kindness and fills with gratitude towards her. After Ammi's death Gudiya lives with Phoolwati in her house who takes care of Gudiya like her own daughter.

#### **Phoolwati a strong business woman**

Phoolwati is one of the important and strong women of the novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*. Phoolwati is courageous and tactful woman who handles the situation very tactfully. She is widow of Shambhu a tea shop owner, a Bihari giant. Widowed Phoolwati comes to Delhi for husband's funeral, who is murdered by labourer Saboo. Saboo's wife Magoo has an affair with Shambhu. After Shambhu's death Phoolwati decides to stay in Delhi with no acquaintance there. His husband's death does not evoke grief and helplessness from Phoolwati but she rejoices in his death, as she did not like his behavior and wants to reward murderer.

Phoolwati has business mind. She expands the business of his husband. She sets up another stall just outside the temple which sells incense and marigold garlands and coconuts and little brass amulets which she orders from Moradabad. She, taking a picture of Ammi by photographer, prints into colored postcard of Grandmother with 'Om', sales outside the temple for two rupees each. She becomes trusted person of Ammi who handles her cash and takes important decisions with Ammi.

She displays admirable courage, imagination and entrepreneurial qualities in handling the situation and her business. As **Subhash Chandra** says: " Phoolwati's association with Ammi, her say in the matters of the temple and her quick earthly responses in not only seizing the opportunities but also creating them, establish beyond doubt her capability as a courageous, practical and farsighted individual, not given to maudlin reactions, but with a healthy practical perspectives on life which enable her to survive, prosper and carve a niche in a new surroundings into which she is thrown on account of Shambhu's sudden death."

Phoolwati is courageous women who is not cowed down by the bullying Pahalwan and courageously faces him. He becomes mild before her and even blushes and smiles at Phoolwati when she returns from temple. She faces Pahalwan boldly and ask him:

"Lost your tongue?" She said sharply. "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? Arre Bhai, Phoolwati is just a timid woman and you are a hero wrestler. Just say what you have to say. You want to discuss business with me, don't you? Then say so! Come to my house at seven this evening, and discuss whatever you want to!" (105-106).

Sundar Pahalwan always admires her. He marries her but the marriage does not present picture of male oppression of the female. Before accepting the marriage proposal, she puts certain conditions before him. These conditions before marriage, shows her practical wisdom and farsightedness where a woman thinks about her future security, and her motherly affection toward Gudiya. She takes care of Gudiya as a mother and sometimes as a friend. Phoolwati explains her about womanhood when Gudiya's menses began. She brings, ribbon, a set of binds, a small mirror, a kajal stick, even a bright shiny lipstick for Gudiya.

Phoolwati is a good administrator. When Ammi died, the number of devotees crowding the temple increased. Pandit Shastri gratefully hand over the task to Phoolwati and she remarkably handles the situation. Gudiya describes:

"Phoolwati's administrative talents shown before the challenge. Each visitor to the temple was presented with a colored picture poster of Ammi, along with a piece of coconut and small card which proclaimed: "Blessings from the mother head". There were orderly lines and neatly cordoned queues, and something about Phoolwati's substantial presence prevented the scores of distraught mourners disintegrating into a riot." (81-82)

Phoolwati's character is beautifully delineated by Namita Gokhale. She does not become a helpless wreck, instead of it she has the capacity to carry on with life and face the situation boldly. She handles her life and business without any male support and speeds her life with Gudiya and her daughter Mallika after the death of Sundar Pahalwan. Phoolwati's practicality and her unsentimental nature are at the complete variance with traditional picture of Indian woman.

### **Lila, a blind follower of Ammi**

Lila, another women character of the novel is also introduced by Namita Gokhale who becomes blind follower of Ammi. She is endowed with a better-defined identity than her son and her daughter-in-law. Gudiya describes her as:

“An old woman with a single yellowed tooth which strayed of her mouth like a minuscule tusk had attached herself with a peculiar ferocity to my grandmother. I always thought of her as being very, very old, though in all probability she was much younger than my Ammi, and could not in fact have been any older than fifty-five.” (31)

Once Lila, accompanied by her son, reaches temple and attends evening aarti, Lila keeps sitting enthralled by Ammi’s bhajans while others leave the temple after aarti, Lila is rooted to the floor in the courtyard that Phoolwati spitefully remarks on her ‘a pile of cow dung’. Lila becomes devoted follower of Ammi. She does all the works of Ammi and Gudiya as well.

Lila leaves her son and family and starts living in temple. Lila becomes the official keeper of the ‘Panchang’ the Hindu almanac and informs about the ways and vagaries of Vedic ritual, auspicious and inauspicious dates to Ammi. After Ammi’s death Lila goes in a state of extreme shock. At the time of Ammi’s ‘Maha Samadhi’ she returns with her son to witness the blessed event. During the movement she loses control, says Gudiya:

“Suddenly she broke away from the crowd and rushed to the side of the pit. With a swift rapid movement, she hurled her gold chain and bangles into the grave.” (78)

Her son looks scared at her shocking act. He also doesn’t know how to react. This event loses her family interest in Lila. After that Lila started remaining calm, she hardly speaks to anybody. Lila goes on a pilgrimage to the four holy dhams. Her journey seems to have given her radical degree of confidence. She becomes pious like Ammi. Like other women of the novel Lila is also a free woman who lives freely without any interference of her son and daughter in law. She knows the reaction of her family after throwing her gold ornaments in grandmother’s graves. As she admits herself:

“It’s all God’s Maya, Gudiya Rani! She replied, playing with her prayer beads as she spoke. ‘When my children saw me throw all my gold armaments, all twenty-two carats, mind you, into your grandmother’s grave, somehow, they lost interest in me. You could say that I’m a free woman now.’” (218)

**Subhash Chandra** reveals Lila’s character: “Lila displays a determined self in her unflinching commitment to her spiritual Guru and goes to the extent of flinging the jewellery she is wearing into Grandmother’s grave much to the chagrin and anger of her son and daughter-in-law who lose interest in her after she is without gold. She, too, like Grandmother, acquires a spiritual aura after she comes back from her long pilgrimage from which she was not expected to return alive in view of her old age and frail health.”

All the women of Namita Gokhale show courage and strength at the time of



crisis courage and strength at the time of crisis. Her women characters show their abilities in financial matters too. They not only stand on their own legs but also prosper by leaps and bounds. They are ready to face the world alone without the support of men in their lives.

**Subhash Chandra** speaks about Namita Gokhale's women: "They have the requisite strength to face life with all its ups and downs; they are sharply etched out in terms of their self and identity. They are cast in the mould of the New Woman who solves her problems herself, and is assertive practical and resilient. This image of the New Women Constitutes a forceful and effective rebuttal to the definition of woman as "a sweet heart, a paramour, a mistress," in most of the dictionaries."

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