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## Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* as a Gender-Bender

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Gender bending, which refers to defying rigid gender roles and norms, is a significant component of Feminism which is a movement to transform not only society's perception towards women but also of women towards themselves. In the prevalent dominant discourse man holds primary place, and woman is not only defined in relation to him but is marginalised as well and cannot be as Luce Irigaray says, "anything other than the complement to man"(311). Treated as "the second sex", woman's gendered identity rests on the dominant western idea of duality of mind and body(mind is equated with man and body considered inferior to mind is obviously, equated with woman) and is governed by binary pairs. Women are, hence, perceived as docile bodies incapable of rationality and devoid of mental abilities associated with men. In the making and perpetuation of this constructionism, or what Laurie Finke calls "the fictivity of Fact"(18), patriarchal narratives not only in the form of social and cultural practices, institutions, scientific inventions and medical practices but in the form of linguistic practices and literary images too, have contributed. By linking women with body, the dominant masculinist culture has chained them to the image of object for male gaze and consumption. In addition by confining them to the domestic domain and role of wifehood and motherhood, man has not only tilted power relations in his favour but has also kept the outer sphere exclusively for himself. To make the matters worse for women, this construction of division between 'man' and 'woman' has been skilfully programmed to appear natural. Monique Witting endorses the same view when she says, "We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us" (218).

Realization of this fictional nature of women's inferiority has given a ray of hope to feminists by providing a premise that what is constructed might be deconstructed and reconstructed. In this agenda feminist writers have been making substantial efforts by using the double edged power of word or literature which means portraying the prevailing images as well as subversive images. Hence, they not only make the gender difference visible but also try to place qualities traditionally associated with male in an androgynous perspective, which means blurring the gender difference to favour the cause of women. So, by challenging and subverting gender roles and norms assigned by society and culture through their constructed images and narratives, these writers are acting as gender benders.

It is in the light of above arguments that the present paper undertakes to analyse portrayal of women in Namita Gokhale's second novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (written in 1992 and first published in 1994). The novel might be read as a gender-bender for the narrative and characters therein not only challenge and blur differences between the sexes by creating a women's world, but also call for sisterhood among women as one of the potent means to empower women. In the novel, almost all women (Ammi, Gudiya, Phoolwati and Lila) are shown face to face with some crisis, but their hostile circumstances neither crush them nor make them indulge in self-pity and despair like stereotyped images of woman. Charting their own survival, they successfully build a realm outside the male-dominant culture. In this process, they not only destabilize various illusions and taboos surrounding women, but also emphasize the need of female bonding or what Michael Ryan calls "supporting communities or relationships that can enable either the struggle to make a post-patriarchal world or the attempt to survive within patriarchy" (114).

The narrative begins with Grandmother/Ammi finding herself and her granddaughter Gudiya tossed into a strangely new and hostile world in a Delhi slum after she is forced to leave her town because of a scandal and their consequent disgrace and poverty. Instead of getting crushed by this adversity, Ammi uses her instinct for survival and innate resourcefulness to set up a makeshift temple out of a stolen marble slab under the holy peepal tree near their hut. Bending and transgressing the dominant image of a docile and submissive woman, Grandmother dares to challenge even Sundar Pahalwan, a goon of the area. When exercising his territorial rights over that area he asks for his weekly money, Grandmother uses her inventiveness and gift of the gab, "I am the widow of a Brahmin, my husband was a priest, guard your tongue or else a virtuous woman's curses may follow you" (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 12). The slumlord not only gets pacified but offers eleven rupees on the pooja thali. This assertion of a false and assumed identity by grandmother has been linked by Sharad Srivastva with "Moll Flanders Syndrome" when to gain respectability in male-dominated society a woman must "present a semblance of virtue" as her weapon for survival. In Ammi's case it is 'obliterating her past altogether' (113) and presenting herself as a woman of religion. This act of manipulating the situation in her own favour establishes her a gender-bender, crossing the dominant gender behaviour.

Ammi is able to turn every situation in her favour with her well-acquired knowledge of handling men, skill of knowing how and when to evade answers and remain silent, and when to show a ferocious Kali-like scowl. She deftly handles Saboo, after he has murdered his wife Magoo and her lover Shamboo, and even the police when it comes to arrest her as a suspected accomplice in this murder. Ammi's administrative qualities are further revealed in her running the temple affairs to perfection with an iron hand and by allocating specific duties to her inner circle of devotees. When Pandit Kailash Shastri seeks entry into temple and its affairs, Ammi is able to see through his ulterior motive. But she is also quick to realize that his astrological skills would not only draw a larger following to her but also serve other interests of the temple. It is chiefly

through his efforts that Ammi is able to get herself declared 'saint' later on. Unlike a docile, passive woman governed by patriarchal norms, Ammi has a knack for taking control of suddenly arising situations as well. When she finds herself lacking in some specific knowledge, she tactfully presents "confusing abstractions as exalted philosophy" or simply utters "It is all Lord Krishna's Leela" (67). It is chiefly because of her tactics, administrative skills and resourcefulness (associated with men in the dominant patriarchal discourse) that Ammi succeeds not only in turning the makeshift temple into a thriving shrine-complex but also in transforming herself from a kothewali to a healing saint with a huge following. It is her cleverly manipulated larger-than-life stature that ruptures male hegemony and helps to keep her mystical aura alive in the narrative even after her physical death.

The narrative bends gender rules also through the experiences of two other women-Phoolwati and Lila- closely associated with Grandmother and temple affairs. Phoolwati enters the narrative after her husband Shambu's death for his funeral. But sensing a much better life here in the temple than in her village, she decides to stay here. Defying the stereotyped image of a traditional unlettered woman from a lower section of society and backward village, she too, proves to be a gender bender with her keen business sense. She is able to transform the old tea-shop into a flourishing 'pooja samagri shop'. Another example of bending gender perceptions is her inventive and innovative mind. Whenever Ammi is reluctant to sing bhajans, Phoolwati finds a way out by taping Ammi's Bhajans and playing these tapes over the public address system. Later on, when Ammi dies, she with the help of Lila and Pt. Kailash Shastri enacts a real 'tamasha'. Ammi's body is made to be seated in a lotus position and word is spread that she has attained Mahasamdhi. Like a tactful business-person she resells the offerings made in the temple to the new visitors and makes huge profits.

In the portrayal of Phoolwati, Namita Gokhale makes a deliberate effort to bend various norms and taboos attached with wifhood and widowhood also. Phoolwati's behaviour after the death of her husband Shambhu might appear unnatural and weird in patriarchal context because instead of indulging in usual wailing, mourning and living a life of deprivation after widowhood, she concentrates on expanding business and living a life according to her own will. She confesses to Gudiya in the later part of the narrative "he [Shambhu] got the death he deserved... someday I will repay that Saboo for the favour he did me" (188). Even as Shambhu's wife (before his death) she refuses to submit dumbly to his drinking and beating as she tells Gudiya "two kicks on his bums would settle him and teach him some manners" (106).

Defying again the dominant cultural constructs about widowhood, Phoolwati does not hesitate from getting married again, and accepts marriage proposal from Sundar Pahalwan at her own terms. It is her commanding and volatile personality that Sunder Pahlwan spares no effort to fulfil even her extravagant demands. She further assets her control over him by taking even his wardrobe in her hand. The feminist message here is that woman has to realize and exercise her

strengths to stop her subjugation. With her strong desire and efforts to transgress a woman can put an end to her marital victimization and oppression and bend the gender norms in her favour.

Phoolwati's handling of Gudiya-Kalki affair also reflects a rare combination of rationality, tactfulness and practical wisdom, usually perceived to be absent in women. She does not hesitate using Sunder Pahalwan's muscle power to get Gudiya and Kalki engaged and later on to get them married in a hurry (on learning about Gudiya's four month pregnancy). However, when she knows about Gudiya's ill-treatment by Kalki after marriage, she is quick to suggest to Gudiya, "The child will have a legitimate father now. Your Kalki has served his function. You can't waste your time like this..." (216). These words coming from a mother to her adoptive daughter is another example of bending gender behaviour.

Whereas in the portrayal of Ammi and Phoolwati, Gokhale makes the novel bend gender norms through their business like practicality, worldly wisdom, courage and exercise of agency in making and sticking to the choices made by them; she makes Gudiya do so through her acts and experiences born out of a rebellious and ambitious young mind. Beginning her fictional journey as an immature girl living in a make-believe world—"I am going to become a film star and marry the Prime Minister's son" (126) — she ends up growing into a mature and confident woman who learns from her own experiences of body and also from her bonding with Phoolwati. In fact, through the bonding between Gudiya and Phoolwati, Gokhale stresses on the need of solidarity or bonding among women to negate, what Bell Hooks calls "sexist socialization" of women and Toni Morrison calls "Willingness of women to enslave other women" (qtd. in Hooks, *From Margin to Centre* 50).

Gudiya's rejection of a promising life with Mrs. Lamba, her school principal, over a free life in the temple establishes her as an assertive being refusing to succumb to pressures. She invents and assumes a new identity by giving herself a new name— Pooja Abhimanyu Singh—and also by inventing a father (since her real father is unknown) for her. To strengthen further, Gudiya's portrayal as a gender bender, Gokhale makes her not only assert her sexuality but also reverse man's dominant position in man-woman relationship. By positioning Gudiya as 'subject' and making her desire and chase Kalki (a man) Gokhale subverts the dominant discourse. Day dreaming of a rich horse-riding prince as her husband, Gudiya happens to bump into a horse-rider whom, Gokhale describes through Gudiya's (a woman's) gaze, "He was so handsome that I could feel my insides quiver. He had a perfectly proportioned nose and a noble profile. He looked like a Rajput prince" (111). Gudiya's obsession and infatuation for this horse-rider makes her (a woman) a chaser of him not only in her dreams but in reality as well. Virtually on his trail, she soon has a sudden encounter with him. Feeling transfixed, she does not mind going for a horse-ride with him. The third meeting with him proves too strong for her to ignore the call of her body and she experiences "the full glory of sex" (154) with Kalki. However, she does not mind planning to dispose him off from her life when he begins subjecting her to verbal and

physical violence after their marriage. Prevailing upon him to try his luck in Bombay and providing him money for ticket and initial stay there (by selling her stridhan), she dispatches him off to Bombay. Her stoic acceptance of the new change — “I was married and yet not married” (223) — reflects her maturity and feminist assertion to opt out of a life of subjugation, oppression and exploitation of her female body. Since she is cast in the mould of a gender bender, so instead of indulging in sulking self-pity, she decides to live her life on her own terms:

I missed him, but I sensed in his absence an opportunity for growth, for escape, which I was determined not to miss. I loved Kalki, but love is not life, and the imperatives of survival pulled elsewhere (224).

However, it is not only through the portrayal of Grandmother, Gudiya and Phoolwati and the main narrative involving them that the text bends gender roles and norms to favour the feminist cause. Gokhale’s deft use of other supporting woman characters (Lila, Mrs. Roxanne Lamba and Madam Malvika Mehta) and their subnarratives further strengthen the feminist stance of the text. Lila, an old woman, decides to stay in the temple to survive the hostility of her son and daughter-in-law. To ensure her survival there, she woos grandmother with her “dog-like devotion” and by doing every menial work, from washing clothes to watering plants and massaging Ammi’s feet. In spite of her limited abilities, she uses her tactfulness to convert Phoolwati into an ally and to become another front-line participant in temple-administration and enactment of various miracles around Ammi and temple.

Similarly, Mrs. Roxanne Lamba is also cast in the image of a woman of substance and power and a gender bender. Whereas she is serving society and the cause of education by helping many socially handicapped girls like Gudiya, her husband Mr. Lamba is only an appendage to her (reversal of dominant husband- wife power relations) for whatever financial and social status he enjoys is because of his wife. Another supporting character Madam Malvika Mehta (a counsellor for under privileged students) serves not only as one of the means to ignite Gudiya’s self-consciousness and awareness but also a voice of feminism through her words to girl students at Mrs. Lamba’s school, “All of you girls can achieve as much as your brothers, perhaps even more. There is no end to the world of possibilities if backed by hard work” (125).

To conclude, almost all of these fictional women—Grandmother, Gudiya, Phoolwati, Lila, Mrs. Lamba – rise above the dominant image of women as passive bodies or as objects of male desire and manipulations. They bend gender rules even in their relationship with men, who seek sustenance from them and are non-entities in their comparison. Further the bonding between these women and its positive influence on their lives serve to highlight the feminist call for sisterhood and solidarity among women as another significant means to rise above the image of women as creatures of mutual jealousies and hostilities. Significantly, the novel beginning with fictional world dominated by women ends also with an all-women-world in Phoolwat’s ‘Aashiana’. Grandmother representing old generation is dead making place for new generation



represented by Gudiya's daughter Malika, but not before teaching them the tactics of survival without the dependence-on-male-syndrome. Thus the novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, through its subversive images of women and carefully manipulative narrative, emerges as a gender bender to favour the cause of Feminism and re-write gender roles and politics.

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