

## EXPLORING THE SURVIVAL OF THE UNFORTUNATES, RECOUNTED BY NAMITA GOKHALE IN *GODS GRAVES AND GRANDMOTHER*

*N. Renuka, Research Scholar, Sri Sarada College for Women, Tirunelveli*

*Dr. V. Nagarajan, Associate Professor and Head, Alagappa Government Arts College, Karaikudi*

**Abstract:** *Namita Gokhale's Gods, Graves and Grandmother is a social satire on Indian traditions and religious beliefs. The story is about how the Grandmother Ammi, a prostitute is turned a saint, who initially started to sing bhajans for surviving and the comedy being, even educated accept her as a God not knowing her past. This shows how people blindly accept when it comes to the beliefs about God. Also the novel focuses on personal struggles and problems of Indian women who try to carve out a rightful place for themselves in the society. The novel pictures the survival of the common man's struggle to live in this country as the survival of the fittest. The story winds around the lives of prostitutes, goondas, lepers, beggars, bandwallas, vendors, petty tea shop owners in short the people of lower strata of society with their whims and fancies. The present study projects how in India self-actualization and living on their own terms concept, brings changes in the individual and society at large and also other Indian convictions and follies.*

**Key words:** *Predicaments, feminine subjectivity, self-actualization, convictions, follies.*

The existence of a brutal custom in Indian tradition, in which a particular sect of women are made prostitutes called the kothawelis, due to their caste in which they are born, is exposed. The narrator, born in a kothaweli family had reminiscences of the times of prosperity of which she muses, "There was a big house, a haveli with a hundred-and- thirty rooms ... Eleven nawabs and two Englishmen were besotted with her." (5). These women are born prostitutes in old havelis but unable to do their business and survive, due to the catastrophes they experience because of the men in the outside world.

Women, especially Indian women take full responsibility of taking care of their children and they struggle a lot to provide them a bright future never forsaking them at any cost. Namita Gokhale introduces such a woman character named Ammi, the grandmother of the protagonist Gudiya. Misfortune befalls and she is turned a beggar. After the elopement of Gudiya's mother their real survival struggle begins. Amidst the initial struggles Gudiya is given education. She tells, "... my secular education continued in the betwixt and between environment of St. Jude's Academy for the Socially Handicapped." Meanwhile luckily the melodious voice of the grandmother which besotted the Nawabs is used by the grandmother for her survival struggle. Gudiya narrates how the old marble becomes the shrine.

We would indeed have starved had not my resourceful grandmother stolen a marble ... she placed beneath the holy peepul 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. Marigold flowers from the sahib's garden, and the third stainless steel thali which we didn't need, now that mother had gone, and our shrine was complete.(1)

Religious beliefs and fear of God are deeply rooted in the Indian blood which can be seen overwhelming in the Indian society. Even priests, soothsayers, babas and sanyasins are respected and adored by the Indian folk. Knowing this the poor women in the novel seek solace in the name of religion

and develop an art of survival struggle by encasing the religious beliefs and fears of the people. Thus, a Pucca cement structure *is made* an idol of worship. A donation box is installed. After a week, a raggedy crowd of worshippers are there around the shrine. A gold and red gharara forms a glittering canopy.

The grandmother becomes the holy mother who chants bajans with a sweet liquid voice. Sundar Pahalwan, the local dhadha does not ask her the rent but instead leaves eleven rupees on mother's thali. The milkman leaves a litre of milk for them. Tea stall owner Shambhu touches her feet and sought her blessings. In a traditional land, when the sinner changes saintly, the society treats her as a demi-goddess. Thus a "kothewali" is addressed as "Mataji". This sort of acceptance can only be seen among the Indian community. Her aim is not to become a rich woman and earn money. Nor to cheat people. She starts as a survival measure feeling responsible to take care of her granddaughter Gudiya. Even in the verge of penury she is not a coward to commit suicide. She is not willing to live on begging. So she decides to use the loopholes in the Indian traditions and religious beliefs for survival. As Gudiya admits:

It was the shrine beneath the peepul tree that kept us fed and clothed, although we were of course not as rich as we had once been, very long ago. Money poured in: eight annas, five rupee coins, even the occasional fifty rupee note. The miracles were not yet manifest, but we were already rich beyond our wildest dreams (4)

Thrown on streets she makes up her mind to live like a widow of a Brahmin because she knows well that a Brahmin widow will be treated with much respect in Indian society. The author stress again and again how people wrestle for surviving. The grand mother is a sample of such persons who never give up but timely uses the situations. Thus she shouts at the dhadha, "Seize our money, Pahalwanji, but spare our self-respect. 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!" (12). Even though socially handicapped, the women in this novel struggle to live in a dignified manner instead of becoming beggars. To quote Sharad Srivastav,

Ammi uses her show of 'virtue' and her 'silence' to successfully manipulate the male-dominated society. She handles Pandit Kailash Shastry by her silence and vague generalizations about theology and Sundar Pahalwan by her show of virtue and piety. (115)

Identity crisis is not only for the rich but for the downtrodden also. Search for freedom and identity is one among the major problems in the Indian society. The protagonist stands as a representative of many Gudiayas in India. Gudiya of the novel, doesn't know her native place, village and identity. She wants to become a creature of possibilities, inferred by her past and also she wants to involve in the process of becoming a totality. Hence, she names herself as Pooja Abhimanyu Singh to get a new and separate identity.

Street life in Indian society is picturized through the life of Gudiya, Ammi, Shambu, Phoolwati and "... a trio of lepers stationed themselves at the temple gates, their tin cans positioned besides them and their stubby arms spread in supplication..."(38). The basic idea of these street people is to turn every opportunity for the purpose of survival. In the words of Sundar Pahalwan:

'We can get a good income from them!' he said seriously, after prostrating himself with suitable humility before grandmother. 'You must keep in mind, Mataji, that most temples do allow these unfortunates to take up residence outside the gates. They get their alms, the visitors get their blessings. It's all fair and above board. If Phoolwati sells garland for seventy-five paise, the remaining twenty-five will find its way to them. You don't lose, I don't lose, they don't lose. What's the harm?'(40)

It is highly pathetic that these people speak business on the belief of God quite naturally because their's is survival for living.

Holy Mothers and Holy Bagavans rule the sentiments of Indian people from time immemorial. Sure, there have been true saints who have guided people. But there are many fake people also. Perhaps the author wants to exhibit the follies of such counterfeits. Gudiya's contemplation as, "Grandmother's death quickly became a real tamasha"(74) is shocking. Pandit Kailash Shastri and Phoolwati used their presence of mind as soon as they find the Grandmother died. In another one hour they prepared the corpse seated in Padmasana posture with her right hand raised as if in blessing. The "amber chunni sequined with silver, embroidered with gold"(76) taken from the old trunk and was draped on the Grandmother's corpse by Gudiya, was informed as the funeral gift from Goddess Durga, Ma Shakti herself. On the other hand the offerings by the crowd, "...were taken back to Phoolwati's shop, from where she recycled them to the next batch of visitors."(77) The drama is over with the distribution of coconuts broken on the head of the corpse which the crowd took home as a blessing. Though all these look humorous, but from the other side, seen from the eyes of the survivors they have acted smart to pull on what they have started.

In India a child born for an unknown father is a sin. Both the mother and the child are not given identity. So Kalki, the bandwallah is forced into marriage with Gudiya because she carries his child. Vandana Bhagdikar views that "It was necessary that the unborn child must have a father so that he would not be called an illegitimate child."(148). But her existence after marriage itself seems vague to her, for it seems to her that she is completely deprived of the involvement in the affairs of life by her cruel and egoist husband Kalki. Unlike a traditional girl who wastes her life, Gudiya is advised by Phoolwati not to waste her time with the bandwallah as their purpose of giving father's name to the unborn child is over: She says "The child will have a legitimate father now. Your Kalki has served his function. You can't waste your life like this, Gudiya with these bandwallahs!" (216).

There is another trait which is rightly pictured by Namita Gokhale. It is surprising to see that the New woman concept has affected not only the rich and the elite even the lower middle class people has the courage to shun off the cause of her pain even it is her husband and tries to live without him. Thus, Gudiya in *God Graves and Grandmother* does not get disheartened by the separation of her husband Kalki. She feels :

I miss 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. Every day, gradually and imperceptibly, his hold on me lessened (224-225)

Economy, education, beliefs of people and their relationships with one another are the basic elements of a society. The author has touched all these elements and a vivid picture of the common man of Indian society is presented in this novel. Behind the humour, one could sense the struggle of existence of the underprivileged so realistically presented by the author Namita Gokhale that a reader cannot look down upon these people but closes the book with a heavy heart accepting all their odds.

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