
**‘SURVIVAL STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN THE VERGE OF PENURY’ IN NAMITA
GOKHALE’S ‘GODS, GRAVES AND GRANDMOTHER’**

PEDDINENI PARVATHI, DR. G. MOHANACHARYULU

Abstract: ‘Gods, Graves and Grandmother’ was written by Namita Gokhale in the year 1992. This novel was a different novel of Namita Gokhale which explores the lives of poor Indian women who struggle for their survival without the help of men because interference of men in their lives brings only miserable experiences. Miserable state of helpless women and their efforts to survive in a dignified manner is the main theme of this novel. This is also a social satire in which Indian traditions and religious beliefs are satirized.

Women are dependents on the men in their family. According to Indian tradition some groups of women are made prostitutes due to their caste in which they are borne. This story deals with the women who are borne prostitutes in old havelis but unable to do their business and survive on it due to the catastrophes they experience because of the men in the outside world. Even though socially handicapped, the women in this novel struggle to live in a dignified manner instead of becoming beggars. As the Indian traditions imparted some religious beliefs in the minds of the people, the poor women seek solace in the name of religion and develop an art of survival struggle by making encashment from the religious beliefs and fears of the people.

Religious beliefs and fear of God are deeply rooted in the Indian blood. Even priests, soothsayers, babas, sanyasis and phakirs are respected and adored by the Indian folk. This traditional aspect is used up by a woman tactfully in this novel in order to survive as well as to bring about her granddaughter. After all, some women cannot deny their responsibility of bringing up their children and grand children. Earning money for food for the off springs lies on the women though no man helps them. For feeding the children they can become beggars, slaves, labourers or even prostitutes. But this is not the case with men. They can enjoy sex with women and do not bother about the pregnancies or borne children due to their lust.

Introduction: The narrator in the novel ‘Gods, Graves and Grandmother’ is a young girl named Gudiya telling about her mother, grandmother starting from her childhood and until she becomes a mother to a child. Gudiya’s grandmother was borne in a haveli to a fashionable lady in the days when there was a fashion for Moghal beauties from Persia and Samarkhand. Gudiya calls her grandmother Ammijan or Ammi.

In her youth Ammi lead the life of a prostitute and brought up her younger brother as her own son. She had also brought up her own daughter, Gudiya’s mother. She educated her brother well and that man was called as ‘Mamaji’ by Gudiya. This Mamaji, after his education, did not do any effort to change the lives of his sister or sister’s daughter. The reasons and the circumstances leading to his suicide were not stated clearly by Gudiya because they happened when she was so young to understand the circumstances and remember them. Mamaji hanged himself to the mango tree in the courtyard.

The family consisted of Grandmother, mother and Gudiya after the death of Mamaji. They lived in a big house or a haveli with one hundred and thirty rooms

and twenty two sesrvants. Ammi or Grandmother was a great singer and eleven nawabs and two English men were her devotees. Carriages, buggies and Rolls Royces used to line up outside their house in the evening. After Mamaji’s death some other man was also died. He might be the lover of Gudiya’s mother. Gudiya couldn’t say much about him as she was young when he was coming to their haveli

After his death, Gudiya’s mother was suspected by the police as his murderess. A case was filed on her. The customers stopped coming to their haveli. This had become a catastrophe in their lives. The beautiful haveli was sold away for clearing the dues of grocers, pawnbrokers, bailiffs and police. Gudiya’s mother worried a lot and her hair had fallen and she became bald.

Grandmother tried all sorts of medicines and spent money to let the hair grow on her daughter’s skull but failed. She pawned her silver hookah and brought an American style wig for her daughter as she is the bread winner through prostitution and there is a necessity for her to look beautiful and attractive. Grandmother had sold away her buggy and horse to meet this expense.

Taking these situations into consideration, their harmonium player proposed to marry Gudiya's mother. But they feared that Grandmother could not accept that proposal. Having faith on the harmonium player, Gudiya's mother wanted to settle her life. So she eloped with him taking all the jewelry and her fine clothes with her. But the harmonium player was a deceiver. He kept her in the railway station and decamped with her luggage and jewelry. Gudiya's mother waited in the railway station for two days for him and walked back home on the third day.

Grandmother was very angry with her daughter and would not allow her back into her house. But due to the intercession of Gudiya, she was allowed to stay in the house. After that incident, Gudiya's mother looked different and more defeated than before. She was not given any clothes to wear except an old burka. The court case on Gudiya's mother created a sensation when the murdered man's wife attacked her in the corridor outside the court. The pathetic condition of her is described by Gudiya as follows:

'The two women wrestled and grappled on the floor. There was no one to cheer my mother on. That woman tore through mother's burka, then seized her blonde locks and threw the wig out of the window. My mother took the witness box without her hair, her fair glistening skull more embarrassingly naked and sordid than the sadness against her. We lost the case and every thing we had.' (page. 8)

The misery of the women does not end up with the loss of property, business and dignity in the society. They stayed in many towns to find lively hood and settle. But they could not settle in any place. They went on changing places and trains. One night at Bhusawal railway station, Gudiya's mother saw the harmonium player who deceived her and decamped with her fine clothes and jewelry. Gudiya describes this situation as follows:

'She began shaking and twitching like a peepul tree at midnight but she did not tell grandmother until the train he boarded had steamed out of the station. Grandmother never wasted her time on anger. She took a betel nut out of her paan-daan and cracked it with her silver saropa. 'I'll do that to his skull one day,' she promised mother. (Page. 9)

These poor women have nobody in this world to help them. But they wished to survive. Gudiya's mother with a bald head was not good for their trade, i.e., prostitution. They met an old beggar at the railway station of Jhansi. That old beggar was Riyasuddin

Rizvi with white beard and wise eyes. He advised the poor women to come to Delhi and said that Delhi was suitable for getting livelihood. In a dusty, dispirited and desperate state the women followed him to Delhi. Riyasuddin Rizvi took them to a lonely road and gave them a leather pouch with money and went away. Gudiya's grandmother sat under a peepul tree and counted the money in the pouch and understood that the old beggar was a pickpocket.

They hired a hut for ten rupees a week from Sundar Pahalwan who had been exercising territorial rights over the pavement. Grandmother might have been planning for prostitution business with her daughter. But her daughter ran away with Riyasuddin Rizvi after a week leaving the old grand mother and Gudiya who was young. She did not feel responsible for her child. As Riyasuddin Rizvi had no objection to take a wife with bald head, she eloped with him.

Grandmother had stolen a marble slab from a building site and placed it beneath the holy peepul tree which shaded their small hut. She brought five rounded river stones from a sahib's rockery and arranged them on the marble altar. She put some marigold flowers and a stainless steel thali or plate in the altar. She put some change in the thali. Thus she prepared a shrine of worship. Then she prostrated herself before the pebbles and lay down so still and silent for a long time. When she noticed the presence of a passer-by, a garbled chant emanated from her throat. As she was a trained singer, that chant was distinctly pious and devotional. In the evening she lit a earthen lamp at the shrine and performed aarti. Shambhu, a nearby tea stall owner gave her a large conch shell. She tied a brass bell to the branch of the peepul tree like a mystical fruit. The next morning people began to come there, bowed their heads, prayed and put money in the thali. Thus she started earning money by opening this shrine.

'Survival Struggle of Women in the Verge of Penury' could be portrayed dramatically in this situation. In order to survive, the destitute grandmother, though she was a Muslim prostitute by birth, she hid her burka, ghararas and beaded reticules in her trunk. She made up her mind to live like a widow of a Brahmin. She knew well how a Brahmin widow could be respected in the society. Thus she planned to live in a dignified manner in the society and started acting according to that. She asked Pahalwan to come next week for the money they need to give him as the rent of the hut they were living. But how could a

Brahmin widow get money? Grandmother was a good singer and very intelligent. She wanted to make use of her talents, intelligence, skills and talkativeness for her survival. She had to earn money to live in the society. She had the responsibility of Gudiya. In the verge of penury she was not a coward to commit suicide. She was not willing to live on begging. So she decided to use her strong points and also the weak points in the Indian traditions and religious beliefs in those circumstances.

Grandmother was in the survival struggle. She had to feed herself and bring up Gudiya. Now Gudiya was motherless. Nobody knew who her father was. That unknown father could not take the responsibility of her. Grandmother concluded that she should diversify her plans to survive. Otherwise they would have starved to death. She abandoned burka and assumed different persona. After one month, Sundar Pahalwan came to collect money to the hut and revealed that the rent of ten rupees would be revised after two years. He also said that if Gudiya or grandmother would beg on the roads, they should pay thirty percent to his syndicate. This is the state of the poor women in poverty. They have to become either prostitutes or beggars. But grandmother is not a woman of cowardice. Then grandmother dramatically said as follows.

'Arre Rama, Rama, Rama,' she exclaimed, her honeyed voice taking to a new texture altogether. '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!' (Page.12)

Sundar Pahalwan came there next week to collect money. At that time a raggedy crowd of worshippers were there around the shrine. A gold and red gharara formed a glittering canopy. A statue of Durga was there in the shrine. A lineman from electricity department connected an electric bulb to the street lamp. Grandmother was chanting bhajans with a perfect voice. Sundar Pahalwan did not ask her the rent but had left eleven rupees on mother's thali and went away. The milkman had left a litre of milk for them. Tea stall owner Shambhu had touched her feet and sought her blessings.

The shrine made by grandmother grew well and people started to come to that place to worship God. A pacca cement structure was made as a temple. A donation box was installed. Several mystical things happened to the people there. Religious beliefs which

were installed in the blood of the Indians started playing their game. Indian tradition and culture came to the rescue of the poor women in need. The electrician who connected an electric bulb to the street lamp got a promotion. The municipal officer who came with the demolishing order of the temple was injured and his nose was burned to a melted bulbous stump because the street lamp via an overhead wire exploded on his head. The next day his wife and mother came there and offered apologies to grandmother and gave her five hundred rupees, a sari and a shawl.

Thus the old grandmother of Gudiya started earning for herself as well as for Gudiya with respect and dignity. As she and her granddaughter Gudiya were about to starve, she started using her talents and religious beliefs of the people around her. She was not cheating anybody. Giving donations to temples and priests is our tradition. So she used this tradition for her survival. Then she started her new life as pious women of respect and dignity. She joined Gudiya in a school and wanted her marry a good and respectable man. Every day they got enough milk, fruits and mithai to eat and lived on it because grandmother had never cultivated skill in cooking. She always felt responsible for Gudiya unlike Gudiya's mother who had run off to have fun.

Khushwant Singh, while reviewing this book on 26th January 2006, in 'The Tribune,' wrote as follows.

'If you have run out of luck, lost everything you owned and are reluctant to work for your living, there is a formula for survival in comfort. All you have to do is to find a big peepul tree (for good reasons botanists call it ficus religiosa) and set up your abode under it. Smear its trunk with saffron paste, put a grey stone against it, and next to that keep a garland or two of marigold flowers and a platter of copper with a few coins in it to encourage others to do the same. Then blow a conchshell and ring bells to announce the advent of a new incarnation of one of the gods of the Hindu pantheon. You will be in good business: plenty of money in offerings, no accounting for it to anyone, no taxes. And much respect from the community. This can only happen in India'

Subhash. K. Jha while reviewing this book first published by Rupa & Co. on 15th September, 1994, in India Today, wrote as follows.

'Satiric circumstances circumscribe the lives of Gudiya, her mother (whose absenteeism lends the mood of doom), her formidable grandmother, the god-woman

Ammi, and most importantly, Phoolwati, Ammi's chief disciple, who represents the heroic dimensions of the politics of poverty, and whose "cheerful corpulence" lends some realism to Gudiya's strange existence.....

Gokhale also exposes the humorous underbelly of merchandised religiosity.'

Literary review on this book on 3rd February, 2002, in online edition of TheHindu, wrote about the Grandmother as:

Her innate charm even at her age and her adeptness at being able to turn a situation, howsoever desperate, in her favour, catapult her from the degrading depths of poverty into a fairly comfortable Brahmin priestess. As she sits over her little temple presiding over the daily discourses, a band of faithfuls begin to flock at her gates.

Having lived as the pious woman 'Mataji', having brought up her temple as 'Mataji ka Mandir, Grandmother died one day in her sleep. Pandit Kailash Shastry, a well known Brahmin declared himself as her leading disciple. Her death was taken as her 'Maha Samadhi' and reported in the newspaper. A colony of beggars was erected before her temple. Worshippers were coming to her temple even after her death. Another woman who sells tea, coconuts, flowers and incense to the worshippers earned her livelihood from the temple worshippers. Gudiya always remembered her as a beloved and benevolent grandmother. She did not feel deprived in her life even after the death of her grandmother. Thus the old woman in poverty lived a dignified life even at the verge of penury cleverly taking the shelter under religion in Indian traditional scenario.

References:

1. Namita Gokhale, 'Gods, Graves and Grandmother', Revised edition by Penguin Books India, 2001, ISBN 9780141006994.
2. Article in 'The Tribune', 26th January, 2002.
3. Article in India Today, 15th September, 1994, in India Today,
4. Online edition of The Hindu, 3rd February, 2002. <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/lr/2002/02/03/stories/2002020300270300.htm>

Peddineni Parvathi/Research Scholar/ K.L. University/ Vadeeswaram/
Dr. G. Mohanacharyulu/ Associate Professor/ K.L. University.