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Idealising Identity: Re-mapping the Feminine Quest for Equality in Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Grave and Grandmother*

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Abstract: The earnest desire of an individual to be treated as equal with dignity needs no separate reiteration. Since time immemorial, there has been the depiction in numerous historiographical records of the attempts made by so called victimised individuals to assert their individuality in the society. At the heart of such attempts lies the concern of individuals to lead their lives without facing the wrath of subjugation. Novels and other critical writings have been the documentary records of female marginalisation to a great extent. However, with the advent of different waves related to the critical movement of feminism, it can well be said that there is the growing consciousness regarding the establishment of equality between both the males and the females. Numerous writers, today, have come up with notable fictions which showcase the urge of female characters to lead a life of dignity thereby validating their identity in the society. Gods, Grave and Grandmother by the notable Indian English writer, Namita Gokhale is one of the scintillating tales of the establishment of a stable identity by the leading female protagonist. Through the portrayal of the character of Gudiya, Gokhale makes it very clear that the women of the contemporary Indian culture are no longer submissive, and they are equally bold and determined with regards to their subjective positions. This paper humbly attempts at portraying the self-created pathway of Gudiya leading to her firm identity in the novel. The nature of this research is purely qualitative, and it focusses on the comprehension of the layers of meanings embedded within the text.

Keywords: consciousness, dignity, female, identity, text

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

--- Judith Butler

The human body, irrespective of any gender, has attained a significant place in numerous discourses and critical practices in modern day literary circle. It is the body which, well and truly, gets converted into a pure site where there are a lot of seen and also unseen violence taking place for concerns related to the establishment of identity of an individual. Talking about identity, an individual cannot reside in a society without a subjective position of his or her own. In this regard, it is of vital importance to take into considerations the numerous efforts which an otherwise subjugated individual makes to assert the identity of the self in the broader spatio/temporal dimensions of living in a society. Michel Foucault remarks in *The History of Sexuality*, (1979) “mechanisms of power are addressed to the body . . . through the themes of health . . . the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object or target (147).

Gods, Graves and Grandmother not only portrays the character of Gudiya to be free and liberating but also, at the same time, makes the readers acknowledge the efforts she makes to structure her own path. The main intention of penning down the novel becomes very clear in the cover page of the novel itself when Gokhale remarks, “The novel is a gripping and enthralling book that wears its many complexities lightly. It will continue to haunt its readers long after they have put it down” (Gokhale cover page). The sense of struggle which engulfs the purview of the novel becomes explicit at the very outset with Gudiya stating, “When my mother went away, my grandmother and I were left to fend for ourselves” (Gokhale 1). In order to make the character of Gudiya stand out, Gokhale presents the readers with the portrayal of the character of Ammi who is said to be an affluent courtesan. Living with her brother and daughter alongside, Gokhale presents the family to be quite well-to-do in nature.

However, tables turned drastically and the family had to deal with a lot of miseries with the mother of Gudiya, Ammi’s daughter being shown to have eloped with an individual who was of low stature. If this was the beginning, the act of committing suicide by the brother of Ammi appeared to be utter devastating for the affluence of the family. Gokhale showcases the lonely life of Ammi and Gudiya in the city as Ammi has moved to a city in order to survive and leave her terrible past behind. By making use of different kinds of manipulative techniques, it was observed that Ammi was making efforts in order to lead her life along with Gudiya in the city. In the words of Ammi,

We would indeed have starved had not my resourceful grandmother stolen a marble slab ...she placed beneath the holy peepul tree ...then she found five rounded river stones, purloined them, really, from a sahib's rockery, and arranged them on the marble altar. Marigold flower 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. (Gokhale 1)

E. Goffman makes a very valid illustration of the core idea of identity in *Stigma* (1968). He states, "By personal identity, I have in mind . . . positive marks or identity pegs, and the unique combination of life history items that comes to be attached to the individual with the help of these pegs for his identity" (74). The chief assertion of self-identity of Gudiya in the novel becomes vivid with the rejection of wealthy life which she would have had alongside the principal of her school, Mrs. Lamba. It was seen that she preferred an open life in the premises of the temple and also comes up with a brand new name for herself, Pooja Abhimanyu Singh. Moreover, it was also seen that she also chooses a father for herself. Thus, there is a clear depiction of the feminine quest for equality in the novel. The readers can also find a clear role reversal in the novel with she being shown to chase a man called Kalki. Also, the scene of dreaming a horse rider as her husband is one of the most poignant illustrations of reversal of gender roles in the novel, "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" (Gokhale 111).

Thus, the act of hankering after Kalki is presented almost in cinematic fashion by Gokhale as she shows that Gudiya enjoys a good company with him as much as that she even enjoys "the full glory of sex" (Gokhale 154) when she met him for the third time. However, the steadfast self of Gudiya never accepted the violence which she had to face after her marriage with Kalki. By changing his location to Bombay, she asserts, "I was married and yet not married" (Gokhale 223). In this way, Gokhale deals with the presentation of the character of Gudiya to be one of sheer ambition and free-will which does not accept and fall prey to any kind of dominance of the patriarchal forces. Gudiya, leading her life as per her own wishes and desires, states, "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 (Gokhale 224).

According to Rupali M. Gaikwad, “Self-Identity as a term is defined by the experts as the recognition of one’s potential & qualities as an individual, especially in relation to the social context” (177). The self-identity of Gudiya becomes very much evident in the novel with the portrayal of her character. It was seen that she was never perturbed by the departure of Kalki from her life as she has very well structured her living independently. Also, as it becomes evident, the real purpose of her marriage was to give the identity of a father to her child as she was living in the Indian society. Gudiya, all told, symbolises the strength and vitality of individuality without any kind of dependence on others.

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