

The Craft of Short Story : A Critique of *The Habit of Love*

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Author of several works of fiction and non-fiction, Namita Gokhale is a well-known name in the field of Indian Writing in English not only as a writer but also as a publisher and as a founder director of Jaipur Literature Festival. Her short stories published under the title *The Habit of Love* (2012) are remarkable for adding a new dimension to the craft of short story writing.

The Habit of Love is a collection of thirteen short stories encapsulating the myriad experiences of their female protagonists who lay bare before the readers their inner world – their desires, passions, fear, anxiety, happiness, anger, ennui and sadness – in kaleidoscopic lights. Based mainly on the themes of love, lust and death, these stories are interwoven with the motifs of time, memory, dreams, travels and mountains. The writer frequently shifts from present to past or vice versa, making several technical innovations like unexpected, abrupt endings; use of startling similes/ metaphors; choice of queer, quirky titles for these short stories. The use of the technique of first person narrative in many of these stories imparts more intimacy to them as if the narrator is engaged in a tete-a-tete with her readers. Gokhale emphasizes the importance of a convincing narrative voice in making a short story effective. In response to a question as to which is the most critical part of a story: the storyline, the characters or the storytelling, she says, “Finding the right voice that convincingly tells the story, whether in first

person or otherwise is the most crucial part.”(Recap: Twitter chat with Namita Gokhale,TNN,22 March 2018)

The characters of *The Habit of Love* are broadly divisible into two categories – one is that of urban women of present times and the other is that of women from ancient times like Kunti, Qandhari and Damyanti. Stories like ‘Life on Mars’, ‘The Habit of Love’, ‘Grand Hotel I’, ‘Grand Hotel II’, ‘Grand Hotel III’ ‘Omens I’, ‘Love’s Mausoleum’ ‘The Day Princess Diana Died’ and ‘GIGALIBB’ reflect the lives of modern women, whereas stories like ‘Kunti’, ‘Qandhari’, ‘The Chronicles of Exile’ and ‘Hamsadhvani’ are based on the inner lives of women from hoary past. Narrated in a unique innovative style, these stories are highly engaging -- reveal as they do the inner lives of these women, whether it is the feeling of tender love of an elderly widow for a young man in the story ‘Life on Mars’ or the inner travails of Kunti in the story ‘Kunti’ as she narrates her story from a subaltern point of view. In an interview to Madhusree Chatterjee, Gokhale says ,“These stories speak of a woman’s need to love, rather than the objects of love. Women love passionately, deeply, often angrily. Real love is not about sexual conquest, it is not a triumphant place, but a place of surrender” (IANS,10 April, 2012).

The present paper aims at critiquing Namita Gokhale’s craft of short story writing which is articulated by the narrator of the story ‘Omens1’ in which she perceives life as a ‘chaotic mess’ which should be reflected in the short stories also as such. She therefore has a quarrel with those who expect a short story “to snap shut at the end with a satisfactory click” (101). Accordingly the stories in *The Habit of Love* too have unexpected endings.

For Gokhale a good story and characters are important but equally important is its structure and its craft. A clue to Namita Gokhale’s craft of story writing can be found when in her answers to questions related to the art of story writing, she emphasizes the importance of structure in a story, “A good story is not enough as grammar and structure help

make it effective and accessible”. (Recap:Twitter chat with Namita Gokhale,TNN 22March,2018)

The stories in *The Habit of Love* are marked by several technical innovations. There is a frequent zigzag of the ancient with the modern, past with present. In the story ‘The Grand Hotel III’ the narrator invokes the past when she refers to the Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya which was built in the second half of nineteenth century but in the very next sentences she talks of the Internet, the Facebook and the Krakow.

Gokhale’s use of similes and metaphors is equally innovative. In the story ‘Life on Mars’ Madhu Sinha, the central character of the story, remembers how she was greatly disappointed at the birth of her third son because she desperately wanted a daughter: “I remembered how it had been when my son was born, he had been the youngest and I was in fact deeply disappointed, I had desperately wanted a daughter. I had stared in despair at *the little reptilian protuberance that indicated his manhood*” {emphasis mine} (11).

In the story ‘The Habit of Love’, the protagonist is a middle aged widow who has been looking after her two growing up daughters after the sudden death of her husband in a plane crash. The death of her husband has shattered her emotionally, she inhabits ‘an endless tunnel of grief’ and she is ‘travelling it alone’. Though she tries to look normal and composed, she knows that the grief of her husband’s death is eating her insides, leaving her nauseous, raw and corroded. She has to cope with the responsibility of raising her daughters, taking them for outings during holidays, trying to answer their curious queries about stars, mountains and many other such phenomena. Defining her relationship with her daughters she says: “The three of us shared disconnectedness. Like three helium balloons bobbing disconsolately against a low ceiling, tangled rather than tied together by our floating strings”(18).

In another story 'Omens I' also, Gokhale's use of similes/metaphors is quite interesting. Describing the ambience of the pilgrim town Rishikesh, the narrator observes, "Everything from the ambling cows to the brass amulets piled up for sale by the riverbank reeked of the sacred"(76). Here the use of the verb 'reek' with 'sacred' is unconventional, as the word 'reek' has a negative connotation. She further observes that "the acrid smell of the marijuana clung to her like a blanket" (78). In the story 'The Day Princess Diana Died' the narrator compares the accident hit car of Princess Diana with a cockroach, "A mangled up car that looked like a cockroach squashed by a pair of wooden clogs"(119). Some other interesting phrases used in this story are: "You have got vinegar in your blood stream"(121), "... turned the perfect circle of love into a potentially unappetizing triangle"(121). In the story 'Life on Mars' Madhu Sinha calls her sons monsters, "...my breasts on whom three strapping monsters had once fed" (7). She finds "Dr Patnaik's slim surgeon hands inside gloves flapping like dying fish" (8). All these phrases are remarkable for their vividness, originality and startling quality.

In 'Chronicles of Exile' there is a telling simile. The narrator observes, "...the damp smoke from the funeral fires had settled like a miasma over the untended pleasure gardens, the abandoned sabhaghars, the lonely palaces"(26). Describing Qandhari's beauty, her maid says "...her enchanting dimpled smile broke across her face like a sunrise" (29). In the story "Grand Hotel I" the narrator describes the sense of great loss experienced by Indians after Pandit Nehru's death, "Death is a dark blob over India today" (49). She comments, "... the combined sense of shared loss has led to a sort of funeral camaraderie with social barriers dissolving..." (47). Here the use of phrase 'funeral camaraderie' takes the readers by surprise, as it were.

'Grand Hotel II' too is remarkable for Gokhale's deft handling of language. In it, the narrator in a sort of reverie remembers her grand mother and many other images of her

childhood : “...her sari flutters in the fierce breeze like a rising circling gull “(53), “the rain is cascading on the roof top like artillery fire” (55), “the third eye of Nanda Devi leaping like a fish between her brows” (58), “the boulders of pain in my heart are ground to a keen fine intensity” (58). In the story ‘Kunti’, Kunti remembers how she felt when Sun God appeared before her, “My eyes were dazzled. I saw him, not with my sight but with every pore of my being.”(91). In ‘Love’s Mausoleum’ women chasing a rich man are compared to flies. The narrator, a divorced wife , says disdainfully “ ...women find rich men attractive, And my husband—ex husband now—is so very rich that they flocked to him like flies to halwa”(101).

At some places in her stories Gokhale takes her readers by surprise by using unexpected turns of speech. In the story ‘Life on Mars’ the protagonist Madhu Sinha , a widow and a mother of three grown up sons settled abroad, develops romantic relationship with Udit Narain who is asthamatic and hence she feels very protective about him. Comparing him with her sons, she calls her sons “ athletic , brilliant and heartless”. Here the word “heartless” being used in conjunction with athletic and brilliant takes the readers by surprise. In ‘Love’s Mausoleum’, the narrator calls Amanda (her foreigner friend) swooping through the white marble in her black cape and tights looking like an agitated bat”(105). She also compares memory with “a locked black trunk which constitutes her past from which memories emerge with a little blip”(110). These stories are also peppered with interesting phrases and slangs like “married sharried” “a girlie lunch” (120) .

A remarkable feature of the structure of these stories is that quite a few of these stories have abrupt, unusual, unexpected endings. In ‘Life on Mars’ the protagonist Madhu Sinha’s friend Udit Narain dies in a road accident while coming to see her in the hospital where she was admitted for cancer operation. Madhu Sinha under the spell of anaesthesia feels like she is on planet Mars, she is floating out of her body, she floats through the

crowded corridor of the operation theatre to the balcony. Looking out of the balcony she notices a single Reebok shoe lying on a ledge below the balcony. On the third day of the operation, while recuperating in the hospital, Madhu Sinha is shocked to see on the Obituary page of the newspaper the photo of her friend Udit Narain who was crushed to death by a redline bus at the intersection of AIIMS while he was coming to see her. Suddenly in a gush of feeling Madhu rushes out of her room and runs towards the balcony where two days ago under the spell of anaesthesia she had seen a single Reebok shoe lying on the ledge. Today also she finds the same single Reebok shoe lying on the ledge. She says:

When I saw the Reebok shoe lying on the ledge below the balcony, I felt a joy I can not describe, a connectedness, a certainty, a sense of relief so intense that I actually collapsed into sister Philomela's arms... I wanted above all to see him once again, to look into those gentle luminous eyes, and to tell him that I understood at last, how contemplating life on Mars could put things into perspective, here, in New Delhi. (14)

Similarly in the story 'Omens I' the ending is unexpected, abrupt. The protagonist Vatsala Vidyarthi who works with an advertising agency goes to Rishikesh on a professional trip. There she is seduced by a Slav hermit in the hotel where she was staying: it was a strangely fulfilling mystic experience for her when she felt like transcending the boundaries of time and space. She muses, "I am him and he is me. We are in the river and the river is within us"(71). But the same night she is also robbed of her purse, credit card and valuables. Whether it was the waiter in the hotel or the Slav who stole her money is deliberately kept ambiguous by the author as she dislikes neat endings to her stories because that "imposes a false order and symmetry on events forcing impressionable young minds to anticipate a similar state from the inchoate mess that is life"(81).

What is remarkable about these stories is that towards the end almost all the protagonists arrive at some kind of understanding about life, whether they get rid of their past burden or they get clarity and sense of purpose about life. For example, in the story ‘Love’s Mausoleum’, the narrator remembers how as a child she was a victim of child abuse when the tabla player in her music class rudely kissed her while she was alone in the room. So deeply traumatized she was by this that she feared she might get pregnant by the kiss. This guilt complex about her imaginary shameful past negatively impacts her married life and she is unable to lead a healthy married life. But one day while returning from Agra to Delhi in car, the chauffeur’s faltering song releases her from that imaginary shame, “... the seven iron bonds around my heart had snapped. The future lay straight and easy as the road before me, and the past – well, it had fled(114)”. Similarly the protagonist of the story ‘The Habit of Love’ also finds clarity about her life suddenly one fine morning, when she is with her daughters in a hotel in Nepal where she has brought them on a holiday trip. Throughout night she dreamt of a lonely mountain, an unnamed mountain which perturbed her a lot but when she gets up in the morning, it is with a sense of clarity and purpose because she is able to name that mountain, “In the clear light of the day I knew what I had not known before. I knew the name of the mountain of which I had dreamt. Naming things makes them tidy, neat, manageable...The name of the mountain was grief” (22).

The titles of some of these stories are quite unusual and quirky. One story is titled GIGALIBB the full form of which is explained in the story as ‘God is great and love is bloody blind’. Some other titles like ‘Omens I’ and ‘Omens II’ are rather odd while titles like ‘Grand Hotel I’, ‘Grand Hotel II’ and ‘Grand Hotel III’ seem to indicate some kind of commonality as they serve as the locales of these stories.

The motifs of travel and memory occur frequently in these stories. It may be because these stories were written mostly during travel, as Gokhale herself observes in Author’s

Note, “These stories were written on and off, over several years. They have been imagined in airports, scribbled during flights, corrected in traffic jams, deciphered from the backs of envelops” (183). The women of these stories frequently travel down their memory lanes and retrieve past memories from there. They are also constantly haunted by the trauma of the death of their near and dear ones.

Thus the stories in *The Habit of Love* amply reflect Gokhale’s craft of story telling. For her, the art of writing is similar to the art of cooking. No wonder she can draw out similarities between wielding the pen and using the ladle. “I believe cooking is similar to writing. Both involve creativity and both require patience” (Relishing the write stuff: The Hindu, July 15, 2004). To sum up, these stories are remarkable for capturing the myriad shades of the interior lives of the women they portray, in a very engaging and innovative style. That’s why their images stay back in the reader’s mind long after he/she has finished reading them.

References

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