

**“KNOW WHAT TO HOLD ON TO, WHAT TO DISCARD” -
A STUDY ON NAMITA GOKHALE’S “THE BOOK OF SHADOWS”**

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We are responsible for what we are and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in the future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act.”

Swami Vivekananda

These lines stimulate one to think ‘what to do’ and ‘how to do’ things in life. Life can be described as the time between ones birth and death. In the allotted period of time, it is the duty of every person to decide and choose actions that he/she could perform to a lead happy life and by the way making others life happy. Everyone either a poet, a philosopher, a scientist, an artist or a religious man or woman strives for happiness, though it is challenging to grasp and even harder to maintain. Happiness lies on the ‘path’ one takes in life. In general there are two paths that fix the life of humans. One is materialism and the other is spirituality. The former relates to the physical body and the latter relates to the inner self (the soul). In other words, materialism means an inclination towards acquiring material possessions and comforts; in short it is a tendency to lead a life in which the body is given preference above anything else. Spirituality means, centered and established on the soul, that is, activities in life are decided by keeping in mind the awakening of the soul.

Namita Gokhale in her novel “The Book of Shadows” provides a detailed delineation of life, materialism and spiritualism through her vivid characters as rightly pointed by The Hindu, “Namita Gokhale excels in extolling the erotic and the exotic. Her fiction is wide-ranging and experimental.... Her characters are haunting.” This article tries to consociate the extreme ends materialism and spiritualism by keenly assimilating the characters Ms. Dona Rosa, the materialist and Father Benedictus, the spiritualist.

Gokhale’s novel admires the nature of Kumaon hills, a part of Himalayas and the nearby village Ranikhet. Rachita, a young lady teaches English at Jesus and Mary College in Delhi. She is engaged to marry Anand, an unstable man in mind, who hangs himself in a sheer fit of passion. Thinking that Rachita is responsible for his suicide, Anand’s sister, splashes a beaker of acid on Rachita’s face, cruelly disfiguring her as an act of revenge. Rachita goes to a house in Ranikhet, which has remained unoccupied for many years and an old servant, Lohaniju takes care of her. The house is inhabited by the spirits of some murdered and suicide. Rachita has no problem in having them around since she lives in imaginary and spends her time in solitude. It is her spirituality and imagination that makes her to encounter the characters such as Dona Rosa, Captain Wolcott, Nicolas Krutz, Nicolas

Mann, Munro, Marcus, Colonel Osborne and Father Benedictus, who give depiction of life involving materialism, black magic and spiritualism. At the end, Rachita begins to find ways to start a new life and gets out from hopelessness and self pity.

Dona Rosa, a beautiful young and energetic lady lives in the haunted house with Wolcott enjoying her life without adhering any morality. When Dona Rosa is introduced, she is brushing her curly brown hair, sitting in a chair of a ravishing room, which brings forth T.S. Eliot's , 'A Game of Chess' in 'The Waste Land':

*The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out" (77- 80)*

Dona Rosa has 'the most serpentine mind', her hair seemed to assume 'a life of its own' and "she had the peculiar concentration of a beautiful woman lost in self-homage." (79) Materialists are always greed; attach themselves towards worldly objects and people and egoism. Their mind experiences joy when these attributes are attended to. Dona Rosa generally engages her time and effort in satisfying the attributes of the body. She expends her hours busily in "writing letters, reading the tarot and often examining her beautiful face in the tarnished mirror, smiling at herself at the sunset." (87) She is alluring that the beauty fascinates even the resident ghost of the house. She is "beautiful beyond belief." (143) She has "naturally pink lips." (89) She is so attractive that Gokhale remarks:

Vitality emanated from her in sparks and starbursts, it lay scattered at her feet like a carpet of light, it created a field of unquestioning force and dancing matter around her. Things bowed to her command - doors, tables, chairs, the apple that she ate, the shoes that she wore. In short, she was magical. (143)

Dona Rosa in her adolescence was a charming, cute little girl named as Laura, who had innocent tender heart that she tried to bring life to a dead fish in a fish bowl. But now she has become a beguiling lady, shedding her immaculateness. She is a prurient, constantly waiting for the chance to explicit her erotic love and has "amber eyes flashing with lust and greed and calculation." (89) Dona Rosa is 'fond of drinking', she "consumed great quantities of alcohol quite regularly." (149) For the materialists new hopes and ambitions arise once the old ones are fulfilled. Gokhale says:

A magician has to be in love with change, and therein Dona Rosa was a better practitioner of the craft. She has slain, buried, slipped out of, outwitted so many of her past personas that she had become an adept. (156)

Dona Rosa is excited when Nicolas Kurtz, a guest of the house gave a 'resolute kiss with lust'. She looks at him 'with rapture' and her eyes are 'sparking with brilliance'. She repeatedly longs for bodily pleasure and mutates the person conform to time. She inveigles Nicolas Mann, another guest to end her thirst. Gokhale reports:

She took on Nicolas Mann, she invited him with a smile and a nod, she ripped off his shirt in a fury of passion. Her body as she took him to her was humid as a plant,

her saliva was warm and salty on his parched lips, her hands felt his body as though in search of something, something he did not possess.” (171,172).

Giving priority to bodily requirements causes frustrations. At last, when Dona Rosa finds no satisfaction in the house, she starts sailing to her native, where on the way she is drowned because of her destiny. Materialism lives in ‘tomorrow’s world of endless desires’ and ‘yesterday’s world of inevitable dissatisfaction’. On the other hand spirituality lives in the ‘present’. Because of their righteous deeds, spiritualists remain satisfied and achieve fame.

Father Benedictus stays in the house before Dona Rosa. He is a spiritualist avowed for his simplicity and solemnity. He recognizes the resident spirit in the house and addresses it “with respect and affection.” (130) He is a balanced person, with capacious knowledge of life. He says ‘temporal human love’ is ‘pale before the eternal love of God’ and proclaims “magic is interventionist and is about gratification, instant gratification. It does not allow the forces of the universe to play themselves out.” (102) Father comes to the village to rest and relax. He is a normal human, who loves ‘rambling walks’, nature and butterflies. He chances to see the house when he is involved in a butterfly expedition. As a spiritual person, he ameliorates his mistake and set all the booty of butterflies free. He listens to the emotion of the spirit, ‘responds’ and ‘respects’ him. The spirit declares:

He accepted my point of view, and moving to the table set free the day’s harvest of iridescent creatures into the scented night air, where a field of evening primrose released its fragrance to welcome them home.” (130).

Spiritualists shower delectation on others with their knowledge, patience, experiences, values, and calmness. Everyone around them become their friends, admirers or supporters due to the high quality of their qualities, deeds and nature. Father Benedictus and the resident spirit speak for many ‘long nights’ about “the art of verbalization, organized thought, the language of humans”. (130) It bestows the spirit ‘joy’, ‘satisfaction’ and also ‘grounds him like human’. The spirit tots up:

Once, when I was protesting the miserable fate that left me without visible or material proof of my existence, the Father gave me this rejoinder: ‘The body, like the clothes we wear, are only emblems of identity, to mark the wearer as such-and-such; these outward accoutrements often serve to conceal more than they reveal. Much deceit and dissimulation hides behind the flowing robes of my cassock. I am, after all, a human, perhaps not a very wise one. (131,132).

Spiritualists offer their service for the welfare of the humanity. They never bother about their own life and find true pleasure in serving others. Father Benedictus, when he diagnoses the evil spirits, Munro and Marcus, he is ‘pensive’ and ‘troubled’. He undergoes ‘fasting’. The spirit exclaims:

He looked at me in surprise, as though I had shaken him from some very distant world, and then bestowed on me a smile of such infinite love and unutterable gentleness that I was restored, renewed, regenerated. I felt soothed and settled

by his aura of strength, surrounded for that moment by the peace of acceptance and surrender.” (139)

Father does not wish to agitate the resident spirit because he “was too gentle to ever scold anyone.” (136) He is indomitable and in the saddle to venture the precipice he challenges his own life. The spirit discloses:

Then he bade me leave. ‘I have now to exorcise the source of this evil’, he told me gravely. ‘To do so I must further evoke it. Go away, far away, beyond harm and danger. Do not return until I call for you. Goodbye.’ (140).

When the resident ghost returns back, he finds the Father dead. Great people mark their presence not by pen, but by their behavior. Father Benedictus marks his presence in the heart of the resident spirit and coerces it to observe for his expatriation. The spirit feels:

I too was orphaned by his death. I still grieve the pain of his departure, although by giving me the gift of words and language he did me a disservice, he bound me to schemes and symbols and dimensions which may insubstantial and incorporeal self should never have entered.” (142).

Life takes meaning according to people and their experiences - to a child it is sports, to a youth it is settlement and to an aged it is peace. Gokhale talks about life as “Experience is the raw material of life. Life is the sum of our meagre experiences.” (66). She adds “Pain is a precondition to life, a prelude to joy. It is a teacher, not a tormenter.” (70). So to accost the upcoming life, it is all-important to understand the two eyes - spiritualism and materialism. It is preeminent to possess spiritual along with certain materialistic characters as everything that is on the surface of the Earth, below it and above it, including the air that we breathe is material. In humans spiritual characters must be in higher percentage than the materialistic, for the simple reason that life is under the control of the particular person. To be a man of happiness as Gokhale points out:

To be ourselves we must remain in control of our scripts. We must make and remake ourselves, possess and repossess our world, cast and recast our lot in every precious moment. Above all, we must know what to hold on to, what to discard, in this radical flux which is life.” (229)

Ryuhō Okawa, a Japan writer writes, “the principle “like attracts like” is one of the laws that updates this world and the next.” (77). In accordance with him, if all the goods are attracted and united, the future world seems to be ‘the place of God’ and future man seems to be ‘in the place of God’.

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