Personal Interview
A meeting and an interview with Namita Gokhale, a popular writer in English was a dream come true. There was no certainty about getting a date from her; also the doubt if she would be accommodative to a stranger from the extreme south whose only credential was the research work she was doing on which this author and her works constituted the theme. When she was contacted over the phone, her warmth overwhelmed the researcher. Travelling over to the capital of the nation, Delhi with a heart full of anxiety as to whether the pains involved would be adequately rewarded was also proved baseless. The author was found least formidable and warm enough to be ready to spend a lot of time for the conversation. The inter-action proved to be an ever memorable experience in the life of the interviewer. Namita Gokhale, with her frank responses to all the questions asked, exuded confidence and dignity.
P.B : A creative writer is said to have a mission. Would you please tell me your mission, madam?

N.G : The best writing comes when you really can’t control it. Even if you don’t want to write, you feel compelled to write. In that moment mission or goal becomes irrelevant; there is just an irresistible urge to articulate your own confusions; your own doubts. I have experienced that urge.

P.B : Do you think writing acts as a vehicle for you to express your ideas?

N.G : There is a limit to what can be expressed in words. On such occasions it is better not to express anything since silence has its own merit. Anyhow the novel provides scope for the writer to communicate in a free manner. However, it also has constraints. That I chose English as the language of expression remained a slight restriction. As it is not my mother tongue I can’t think in that language. But I chose it out of my love for it.

P.B : Do you follow any specific writing method madam?

N.G : Not at all. I do have very little discipline in writing. I wait for ideas to mature and when it happens I’ll have absolutely no option but to write and I write. For a long time I couldn’t pen down anything. The sight kept on haunting me. After months when I was standing in the security queue in the air-

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Interviewer : P. Brahmavathi
port, I felt inspired. I couldn’t wait for a second. I moved out of the queue; I sat in a corner and I wrote. This experience proves that no writer can write for the sake of writing. When ideas get ripe he can no longer contain it, he has to send it out.

**P.B** : I believe Muriel Spark is a writer you admire most. Have you been influenced by her?

**N.G** : Muriel Spark died recently in her nineties. She always felt that she had said everything she wanted to and there was a lot left unsaid. She was an enigmatic woman. The combination of her sense of humour and her enigmatic style appealed to me.

**P.B** : What accounts for the 10 years gap since the publication of your first novel in 1984?

**N.G** : When I wrote *Paro* I was 26. It was a success more than I imagined. Then I wrote the next novel, *A Himalayan Love Story*. It was considered too hot to handle by most publishers. They rejected it as sexy and sensational, which actually is one style. I felt discouraged and feared that the writer in me faced a dismal future and I stopped writing. In 1991, I was affected by cancer. I did not want to leave the world with just two books to my credit. I became active and wrote two more books - *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* and *The Book of Shadows*. I experienced an acceleration of energy within me. Misfortunes such as my cancer or my husband’s untimely departure didn’t
dampen my literary spirit. Actually the books written during my crisis turned to be the best works; may be those were the products of the catharsis I experienced during that period. Then I continued writing; somehow the pace isn’t the same. That’s all.

P.B : Would you please sum up your experiences in your college life?

N.G : I studied in Jesus and Mary College. I really loved my college and mentioned it in The Book of Shadows as the college where Rachita, the protagonist is working. During my studenthood I came across some strange experience which made deep impact in my mind. As a student I didn’t pay much attention to my lessons as my love for reading distorted my attention from the lessons taught in the class. In the first year I was smart. It was in the second year that I met my husband-to-be and I got married soon afterwards. There was a nun from Kerala who dissuaded me from my affair with Rajiv, as she didn’t like him. But I went ahead and married him. What bothered me was the curriculum followed in the class. I wanted to study some Indian language. I said old English is not my interest. I began to ask myself what was the use of studying Chaucer by Indian students. I preferred Indian language study. I opted for modern Indian Literature in Hindi. Then there was the problem of attendance. As I had stopped Chaucer classes I was short of attendance. I was held back along with some other girls. My sister-in-law was a lawyer. She went to the court on our behalf. My father-in-law was a law-minister. It was the time of emergency. It was left to the discretion of the Principal. Even though ours
was a genuine case, the Principal refused to exercise her discretion and our results were held up. This sealed up my chance of becoming a graduate. I would be a graduate if I was ready to attend the college for one more year. I didn’t want it that way and I remained an undergraduate, not a graduate.

**P.B**: As a woman writer of the modern times, have you attempted to convey a particular ideology through your novels?

**N.G**: No, I don’t believe in ideology. I am a tough person but not a strong person. I speak up my point of view and I always accept another point of view. I don’t insist on others following my point of view. That is why I often write in the first person. I make the protagonist speak in the first person; the point of view conveyed through the protagonist is exclusively her own in the given situation. I don’t have any ideology; I just admire qualities like truthfulness and moral strength wherever I see them. I don’t have any gender or feminine ideology.

**P.B**: In Indian writing in English, the term ‘feminism’ has become a cliché. Would you please reveal your attitude to this term, madam?

**N.G**: I think Indian culture can be called a feminist culture; goddesses are worshipped as the source of strength. In other cultures gods are given dominance. For example, in Greece where a number of goddesses were worshipped in the ancient times, Dionysus, the god has occupied the highest position in the pantheon. In Indian ambience, the term ‘feminism’ has great
validity. It is paradoxical that India which has always allotted a respected position to motherhood has been putting so many injunctions on women. The Laws of Manu were not fair to women. I think, India in the last twenty years is becoming equitable to women. As such, I am not a feminist and my views cannot be categorized as feminist views. Moreover many great writers dealing with women’s issues are found to be men. Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is the greatest book ever written on a woman’s mind. The author has analysed a woman’s mind as a psychologist would do. Literature can’t afford to be homogenous; it is androgynous. A writer who has an insight into human life finds a compulsion to write on both men and women. For a good writer, it becomes essential to incorporate the feminine and masculine sides of humanity in order to make his writings relevant for all times.

**P.B** : To me it appears that you stand apart from other Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur in the treatment of women...

**N.G** : May be because I write with a bit of objectivity. Many of them I admire and respect. But I adopt my own way of writing. When *Paro* was published, I was compared with Shoba De and my work was branded as a sexual best seller. Some thought I was trying to compete with De. But it was wrong.
P.B : I have read that you are one among the novelists contributing to “repatriated Indian English writing”. What do you have to say on this, madam?

N.G : I am very proud if somebody has said so, because I would like to be in that space. An Indian writer should write for his native readers. There are some writers to whom India is only a raw material; they concentrate on foreign readers and write to satiate them. To my belief, only an Indian reader can perceive what is written about India in its diverse form. My novels are read and enjoyed mostly by Indians. A friend of mine from the States frankly said that she could not enjoy my Shakuntala: The Play of Memory. After she had done some course in Indian philosophy she read it again and liked it. Nobody outside India can really enjoy an Indian novel.

P.B : It is said that no writer can progress without inspiration. What may be your source of inspiration, madam?

N.G : No writer can progress without pain or a lot of inspiration. It is pain that prods. I have yet to meet a writer who says he is happy. Whenever I have remained carefree I have been lazy, starving for inspiration. It is pain that stimulates a writer. To me, pain has been a friend and not an enemy. Without pain no writer can evolve.
P.B : Do you have a particular inspiring situation or incident for each of your novels?

N.G : No such particular inspiring moments so far as I am concerned. Mostly I get inspired when I sit alone. Silence is audible. I listen to the singing of birds; I hear the voice of the character who I am about to create. Then it is easy for me to write the thing.

P.B : I think all your novels are women-oriented and feministic and in almost all of them the protagonists find themselves in precarious situations which lead them to rebellion and regression. What can be the cause of this predicament?

N.G : I am a woman and so I am interested in the affairs of women. I use my writing as a tool to express my response to the treatment of women in the human society. This does not or should not make me a feminist. I get offended when I see the discrimination between the man and the woman in the society. I am angered when some women try to defend the men by saying that they have their own problems; life is not less difficult for them so on and so forth. I also do not agree to discrimination on account of caste or gender. Being born in a Brahmin family, I have found that there is a set of values and beliefs which are thousand years old and not changed for the new situation. I cannot justify privileges being monopolized by a group of people on the basis of the caste they are born in.
P.B : Madam, do you set any ‘Lakshman Rekha’ for women in your novels or are you an advocate of absolute freedom for women?

N.G : This question of ‘Lakshman Rekha’ I have been trying to address for the last six years in an anthology, *In search of Sita*, I have been working on. Sita is actually the representative of Indian womanhood. But she has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. Of course, she suffered from inequity and prejudice. But Sita retained her strength all through her trials; not yielded to fear or diffidence. She preserved her honour and at the end when she once again faced the same humiliation which she had successfully gone through once, she decided to proclaim her womanhood. She rejected Ram Chandraji’s offer to receive her and vanished for ever. She personifies the strength of an Indian woman. A woman can assert herself by means of her qualities like sense of duty and loyalty to her partner, children and swadharma. In no circumstance can she forget her obligation to the family and to the society.

P.B : A reversal of patriarchy is pervasive in your novels. Can such a state of affairs come into existence?

N.G : Of course it can come into existence because patriarchy came from a particular social set-up based on certain order and values which stood prejudicial to women. Right from her childhood a girl is treated as unclean. It puzzles me why a menstruating woman is considered impure. It is certainly absurd to treat a human being as dirty. That is why I am interested in Sita, an emblem of non-reasonable patriarchy. Reading *The Ramayana* and *The
*Mahabharata* taught me a lot. *The Mahabharata* affords space for non-patriarchal set-up. It is full of strong women characters such as Draupati, Ganga, Ambika or Ambalika. All of them assert themselves very naturally. That is why you are not supposed to read *The Mahabharata* in your house. If you read it, they say there’ll be quarrel in the family. I believe that the men folk in the family don’t want their women to read *The Mahabharata*. They want them to read only *The Ramayana* because the story of Sita is more convenient than the story of Draupati. Can you imagine what a strong woman Draupati was. She realized her pledge to avenge herself. Even Kunti is a strong woman. All women in *The Mahabharata* as such are especially strong women. So I think history rotates and there will come a time when patriarchy is a thing of the past.

**P.B:** The protagonists are assertive, radical, unhesitant, immodest and unfeminine. They are transgressing even the basic cultural values. In which category of women would you place them? 

**N.G:** You are absolutely right in describing my women characters. But I don’t think they are transgressing the boundaries. I think they are testing the boundaries and through them I am also doing the same. I am testing the boundaries. With Paro, I did it. There is a character of mine called Priya who stayed within the boundaries while Paro transcended it. Parvati in *A Himalayan Love Story* transcended just a little and suffered. But her daughter gives the hope that women may not suffer always. They are almost cautionary tales.
Gods, Graves and grandmother and The Book of Shadows are about survival of women; whether it is Rachita or Gudiya or Phoolwati, all survive.

P.B: What accounts for their vengeful and unfeminine advances?

N.G: I actually make very few feminine women. Women in their young age of 17-25 may have that camouflage of femininity to detract men. But most of the women I know are not truly feminine. Many of the gay men, I know, are more feminine than women. Femininity is the strength of a woman. Kali, the true feminine character in Hindu mythology represents this attribute of a woman. Chandi also is a symbol of femininity. Actually women who stand as the source of birth and sustenance to humanity are in charge of the creation. She carries another human being in her womb. Can a man dream of doing this? It is this magic that gives women the strength to face all challenges she encounters in life. Women are more pragmatic and gentle than men. They have huge resources of strength within them which they try not to show before their mothers-in-law and their husbands.

P.B: What do they gain through such unconventional ventures?

N.G: What these women do cannot be termed unconventional ventures. They just don’t bother about the conventions. Some of them are perhaps not adequately indoctrinated to be aware of their boundaries which they transgress. It all depends on the situation they are in.
P.B : None of the protagonists is free from either pre-marital or extra-marital relationships......?

N.G : It may be so in the case of the protagonists. It is because of the sort of women they are. The personality and the overall profile of those women get reflected in their pre-marital and extra-marital relationships. At the same time there are several minor women characters in my novels who are loyal to their partners.

P.B : No marriage in your novels is a happy marriage. Both love marriage and arranged marriages are failures. What is your view on marriage?

N.B : May be there is a touch of autobiography in my treatment of marriage. I had a difficult marriage and I encountered both happiness and unhappiness in it. I view marriage in terms of my own experience. There cannot be an ideal concept of marriage according to me.

P.B : No male perverts are seen suffering as women perverts do. Why?

N.G : The case is actually true. I think male transgressors always get more space and latitude. They are much more licensed and free from restrictions. The society keeps a different code of conduct to men; their flaws are often condoned. Hence they do not suffer from their actions.
P.B : As in Shoba De’s novels, your men characters are not significant. Is it an attempt at subverting patriarchy?

N.G : I have heard such a comment which I think points out a blemish on my part. Srijan, Shakuntala’s husband, is a sympathetically shown balanced human being. I think I’ll be able to come up with a more promising male character in the near future.

P.B : None of the protagonists get a chance to commence a new life. What does it convey?

N.G : Absolutely, they don’t get a chance. But hopefully, it will make the readers have the strength to have a new life. Those characters who get a favourable situation redeem themselves. Gudiya, Phoolwati and Rachita make a challenge to turn a new leaf. I see the survival instinct in women is exemplified by these characters who somehow manage to survive.

P.B : Some of your characters pictured as amoral and promiscuous initially, undergo a transformation all on a sudden. How do you explain it?

N.G : Some of them possess dual interests. For example, Priya and Shakuntala seek for adventure; once they taste it, they get satiated and long for security. Shakuntala is a character who actually loved her husband and was driven by a combination of jealousy and curiosity to venture into the big world, but was not able to cope with it. She has already burnt her boots. So she can’t go back. But
Priya is in a different level of society. She represents a different level of social transgression. She is clearly a pragmatic character whereas Shakuntala is innocent. Gudiya is completely different. She recognizes that she has made a wrong choice in Kalki. She has the sense to realize that her romance with him was just a fascination which lived for a short span.

P.B : Do your characters represent a cross-section of the society?

N.G : Yes. I observe that a lot of writers who write about India really scratch the surface of society. May be I have also not gone into the depth. However, I am bored of upper-middle class women, the topic of many Indian English writers. I have tried to deal with a cross-section of Indian women in my novels.

P.B : The male perverts in your novels escape to Bombay and Bombay accommodates them. Does it hint at something?

N.G : Bombay, and Delhi too, symbolize something in my novels. Delhi is an Indian city, the capital city but Bombay because of Bollywood and other reasons. An Indian’s escape to Bombay means his escape to fantasy success. Everybody who wants to be a success thinks of Bombay and not America, now. Bombay is the imaginary success route or fantasy route or escape route.
P.B: All the mothers created by you are alike. Is it because you want to bestow universality on motherhood?

N.G: Absolutely I wanted to portray a particular aspect of the motherhood. I know all the mother characters in my novels are almost alike. It doesn’t mean that all mothers in the world are so. For example, my own mother does not share the qualities of the mothers I created in my fiction. But I have seen such mothers—those who set boundaries for their daughters which the latter transgress in future. Parvati’s mother herself violates the boundary out of necessity. Fallibility on the part of the mother paves the way for the daughter’s unsteady mental condition.

P.B: In the note to the novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* you have said: “It is completely unlike my first novel *Paro*”. Does it point to your evolution as a writer?

N.G: I don’t think there has happened any evolution on me as a writer. They are both comic novels in some sense. I just wanted to switch my attention to another field; to laugh at another level of the society. It is just like turning your camera to another angle. That’s all.

P.B: In what way the title *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* significant?

N.G: *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, it began like this. I happened to read a famous book written by an author called Schliemann. The title of the book was
Gods, Graves and Scholars. It was about archaeology and ancient times. When my book stood completed I could not fix a title. When I began the novel I wanted to have a title that would be enigmatic and puzzling. I chose this title. It is about gods, there is a grave in it and there is a grand mother. The title, The Book of Shadows means a lot more. In the ancient tradition of witchcraft, every witch is supposed to write a book of shadows and then the witches are supposed to burn up these books. The book of shadows is supposed to be the deepest experiences of the witches in their lives, as recorded in their own words. I have heard and read about this book of shadows and hence this title The Book of Shadows.

P.B : At the end of the novel, A Himalayam Love Story, Mukul, the ex-lover of Parvati, returns to Hongkong abandoning the shattered Parvati and her daughter. He finds excuse in ‘Country conditions’. Can you please enlighten me on this, madam?

N.G : By ‘Country conditions’ I meant the hopeless situation in India in terms of poverty and illiteracy and the caste system. Parvati symbolizes all these. Mukul influenced by the western culture was sympathetic to her, yet he would not think of giving protection to Parvati and her daughter. I have focused on a situation when India deserved only sympathy from the international community that would comment: “Oh, India is full of Parvatis and India is full of pain”. Fortunately that situation has changed for the better as India is shining among the nations of the world.
P.B : There is a streak of "foreign" in all your novels. Does it go with the rhythm of the story?

N.G : It is a technique of foregrounding. It is a way of looking at things on a macro level. It is observing the situation through a window and projecting the observed things through the characters. But in *A Himalayan Love Story*, the character Mukul is a native who views things through his eyes which are familiar to the situation in India.

P.B : Through your women characters, especially through Shakuntala, you have emphasized the strength of a woman. What is your conceptualized idea?

N.G : I always thought that strength comes from truthfulness, sincerity etc. Later experience in life taught me that a person especially a woman requires strength for the mind. It is sheer strength that makes it easy for that person to face any ordeal in life. Weak people are exploited everywhere. Even in scriptures we can have any number of examples. Abraham, the pious Christian propitiated God by sacrificing his son who could not utter a word in protest. In our own times, especially in remote villages, animal sacrifice is believed to be a means for pleasing the gods. The animal sacrificed is a weak one (a goat); not a strong tiger, not an elephant, no not even the horse. I have wondered why a physically strong animal is not chosen for this absurd rite. The same truth I discovered in the treatment of women in the society. Women are branded as the weaker sex. They are exploited. A woman has to be strong not only physically but also mentally to withstand the ill-treatment meted out to her. Strength is
what especially women need and I believe women have more courage than men. I am not gender biased however.

P.B : Is there present a motif common to all your novels?

N.G : Earlier I couldn’t find a motif. I thought all my novels are different from each other. I think, now I have found some motifs. Towards the end of the novels, the word ‘benediction’ turns up. There is a bizarre sense of humour that seems to crop up every time. There is a lot of sexuality in the novels. Sexuality is not for its own sake. I think a woman’s inner being comes out through her sexual attitudes and motivation.

P.B : How do you assess Indian culture of the modern times?

N.G : I think Indian culture has always been modern. It has been one of the most modern cultures ever. The reason is that it has always been a very dynamic culture. There are some things in the undertow that never go away. But on the surface it has inter-acted with other cultures especially English on account of our colonial experience. Through this inter-action there have been many additions and deletions. It is this flexibility of Indian culture that enables it to stand the test of time. On the contrary, Chinese and Japanese cultures preferred to stay isolated. The result was disappointing. Anyhow, as a result of the recent cultural revolution China has updated its culture. Indian culture is diverse, pluralistic and well-integrated. It absorbs the good traits of other cultures and enriches itself. It absorbs from the British, the Arabs, the French,
the Portuguese . . . As Indian culture has the capacity to absorb so much, it is always modern.

P.B : From a close reading of your novels I perceive that the repressed women protagonists become rebellious and their pursuit finally ends in regression. Do you agree, madam?

N.G : That's true actually. I think you have really put it well. Thank you. Repression is a psychological phenomenon which harms the individual concerned. A repressed person loses mental balance and harmony. He or she turns to rebellious methods to show his or her protest. Rebellion won't be a balanced act. A rebel is to be trained on how to wisely use his/her strength; the strength that comes from rebellion would be ruinous.

P.B : Do you favour tradition or modernity, madam?

N.G : I really love and respect tradition and rituals. But tradition is to be fluid and not rigid. It is left to the individual to follow tradition or break it. Each has the right to observe his own rules provided he does it keeping in mind the interest of the society and its progress. Through my fictional men and women I project this. They question the norms and pass over them and meet with disasters in the end. Questioning often leads to disaster. No one can break tradition without inflicting injuries on one self because tradition is the accumulation of experiences spanning centuries. At the same time, the tradition
when gets worn out, should be revived and revised. A good tradition is always flexible and accommodative.

In the Hindu patriarchal system, the tradition remained inflexible for long. It affected the life of the people adversely. It is not advisable for a society to be tradition-bound. It should adjust with the changing times. Such a tradition helps the people grow and improve themselves. *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is merely the story of a girl with that name. It is actually dealing with the Buddhist tradition and the Hindu tradition. When Buddhism questioned the out-dated Hindu tradition it was chucked out from India by the Hindu philosophers. In my opinion tradition can be questioned and amended. It should not be done in a rebellious way, but gently with moral strength.

**P.B:** What is your message to the present generation of women?

**N.G:** I get upset to see that Indian women have surrendered their identity in this consumer driven society. They seem to think that by carrying a vanity bag manufactured by a famous company and putting things like lipstick and other cosmetics in it could elevate their status. They, especially young women, are actually falling prey to consumerism. This does not make them free individuals. A woman finds herself caught up in a network of duty at home and outside. She is supposed to perform all these duties in the best way possible. Then only she can claim the real womanhood. While she fulfills her duties to others she has to be careful about her own self. She has to fulfil her own aspirations. For you, it may be to encourage your own literary instinct.
I would like to give three tips to the women of my times. Women are women, not men. I mean a woman should be happy to be a woman. She should not curse herself being a woman and not a man. A woman's real strength comes from her sense of duty and loyalty. By loyalty, I don't mean sexual loyalty to her husband, but loyalty to her situation; loyalty to dharma. It is the moral strength of Indian women which has held our society together even though it is not acknowledged by the male-dominated society. If today we have a great civilization, it is because for thousands of years Indian women have held the family together and I just hope we don't lose it in this new obsession for one washing machine, one fridge etc. in this consumer society. Women have to be much stronger. If Indian women lose their sense of duty, the strength of India will suffer. The strength and dedication of the Indian mother, the Indian wife and the Indian grandmother that knits our society together is admirable. It is the Indian woman's capacity to stand all challenges in life that makes her distinct from a western woman who gets emotional and upset for silly things. This is not a message but my observation.